Indian journalism and the ruling elite: a case of contingent heteronomy

Swati Maheshwari

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Indian Journalism and the Ruling Elite:  
A Case of Contingent Heteronomy

MAHESHWARI Swati

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements 
for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor
Prof Colin Sparks (Hong Kong Baptist University)

092019
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

I have read the University’s current research ethics guidelines, and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures in accordance with the University’s Research Ethics Committee (REC). I have attempted to identify all the risks related to this research, obtained the relevant ethical and/or safety approval (where applicable), and acknowledged my obligations and the rights of the participants.

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ABSTRACT

The central question in this thesis is what are the interrelationships between the news media and those at the center of power and how do these shape the role the media play in democratic processes, particularly since neoliberal reforms in 1991. More specifically, this research attempts to illuminate journalistic practice and the factors that influence it, at the intersection of political and economic interests in what is often described as a crony capitalist polity (Kohli, 2007; Varshney, 2000).

This has been done by examining three case studies that represented the interests of those at the center of power and the growing collusion between the state and private capital that has been a mark of the polity’s neoliberal turn (Chandrashekh, 2014). Each of these — the Nira Radia conversations that exposed the nexus between private capital and the state, the news media’s coverage of the political elite, mainly the Gandhi family and the leader of the Hindu majoritarian political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Narendra Modi, and lastly, the media’s coverage of India’s richest business house Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and its owner Mukesh Ambani — was marked by extensive self-censorship by the national mainstream news media. The theoretical architecture underpinning this project draws on three major approaches — political economy, field theory and new institutional theory provides a framework sufficiently sensitive to the range of pressures and influences journalism is subject to. This research draws on forty semi-structured, in-depth interviews with forty journalists and editors who were directly involved in the editorial processes of each of these news stories.

The salient finding of this project is that the field of journalism has been subject to regular incursions from the field of power, particularly when political and economic interests are aligned, such that the field of journalism collapses in the field of power resulting in the need to
reassess Bourdieu’s claim that fields, however heteronomous, possess a degree of autonomy. This research finds that journalism is not merely embedded in the field of power, it plays a more pernicious role after economic liberalization. It becomes an active participant in negotiating and consolidating the dominant coalition of economic and political interests on which the polity rests. In other words, it is recruited by the field of power in institutionalizing crony capitalism.

However, the self-censorship could not be sustained and unraveled, albeit briefly, in each of these cases. Contradictions between the macro forces induced by the consolidation of democracy, dissensus within the elite and constitutional limits circumscribing power are some of the variables that allow for interstices of journalistic autonomy. Thus, new institutionalism’s insistence on retaining the political elided by both political economy and field theory, is valuable. Lastly, this research foregrounds the role played by journalistic agency in upholding the democratic mission of journalism.
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For my babies Vidushi and Vatsala...
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The central question in this thesis is what are the interrelationships between the news media and those at the center of power and how do these shape the role the media play in democratic processes, particularly since neoliberal reforms in 1991. This research attempts to illuminate the range of restrictions that are brought to bear on journalists and journalism by those in power. This thesis seeks to go beyond description and offer explanations of the mechanisms and processes through which the media is constrained from playing its democratic role in the polity and the reasons for it. More specifically, this research attempts to illuminate journalistic practice and the factors that influence it, at the intersection of political and economic interests in what is often described as a crony capitalist polity (Kohli, 2007; Varshney, 2000).

By doing so, this research explores the broader question of what role does the news media play in democratic processes in the Indian polity which shows both, persisting illiberal features and democratic consolidation at the same time (Ganguly, 2012; Varshney, 2000). Is the news media helping deepen democracy – make it more participatory and inclusive – or aiding consolidation of extant structures of power and privilege? India has held seventeen free and fair elections since Independence with a brief authoritarian spell (Ganguly, 2014). There seems to be a consensus amongst political scientists that Indian democracy has become more inclusive and participatory (Varshney, 2000; Kohli, 2007; Ganguly, 2014). Economic liberalization in 1991 set India on the path of rapid economic progress with the country growing faster than China. Despite this, economic inequality has grown with the benefits of economic restructuring disproportionately accruing to the rich, growing concentration of private ownership and nearly stagnant growth in employment and manufacturing industries (Kohli, 2007). More recently, the world’s largest democracy faces critical challenges from the rise of illiberal right-wing Hindu nationalism that has introduced new forms of exclusion making minorities and
dissidents more vulnerable than ever before (Rajagopal, 2016) marking a seismic shift in Indian politics (Ganguly, 2014). There remain significant questions about the democratic health of the state that has failed its population of more than a billion people at the level of basic education and healthcare (Varshney, 2000). This research casts a critical look at the role played by the news media, a key democratic institution, in the complex, often conflicting, political processes of democratic consolidation.

Interrogation of the role the news media plays in the country’s democratic processes has taken on increasing urgency after economic restructuring led to deregulation of the media sector resulting in enormous expansion making it one of the largest media markets in the world. Till 1991, India was one of the most heavily regulated economies outside of the Soviet Union. There was a panoply of regulations, controls and licenses that governed all economic activity. As such, the nation had access to one government-controlled television channel although the print media was more vibrant. One of the biggest beneficiaries of the Indian economy opening up, certainly the most visible one, has been the media sector with the proliferation of hundreds of television channels, newspapers, magazines as well as online media. It has transformed public discourse and political processes with little consensus on what the implications are for the emergent public sphere (Mehta, 2008; Rajagopal, 2001; Rao, 2008; Thomas, 2014). There seems little doubt that the media, previously a marginal actor, has become a significant political actor in the complex social matrix of the country (Rajagopal, 2016; Mehta, 2008).

As the closed, command economy opened up to and integrated with the global economy, media proliferation was seen through a largely celebratory lens. Indians grew up on an insipid and uncritical diet of news and information meant to support the government’s development agenda until the 1980s. Opening up led to a dazzling array of multiple foreign channels providing welcome relief fueling social aspiration, reshaping public and political participation (Udupa, 2015). As a result, there was little interrogation of the widely held belief that free markets would signify free media. The newly liberated media was an unapologetic cheerleader for market
reforms in the country. Expansion of the media intersected with subterranean political and economic changes unleashed by liberalization in unpredictable ways. Scholars like Sevanti Ninan contend the reach and sway of the media in every corner of this vast country enabled grass roots political participation, a flow of information, creating awareness and hunger for news (Ninan, 2007). In India, this celebratory narrative lauded the news media’s role in enhancing the deliberative and participatory nature of democracy unleashing the country’s entrepreneurial energies (Mehta, 2008; Rao, 2008). The news media is credited to have highlighted political corruption and articulated the voices of the marginalized in spite of growing commercial pressures (Rao, 2008).

Recent ethnographic work by several scholars on the news media, its production and reception processes (Roy, 2011; Rao, 2010; Udupa, 2015) has started the process of shedding light on the implications of these rapid changes for the country’s democratic structure but there is a dearth of meaningful literature available about journalism practiced in the country today (Rao, 2018). A closer look at the implications of these rapid changes has given pause to the celebratory narrative of media proliferation.

Two decades after the restructuring of the economy, there is a growing concern that the media perpetuates the interests of those at the center of power and acts at the behest of the entrenched power structure. There is no doubt that commercial pressures on the media, a race to make greater profits at the cost of the media’s public goods role, have intensified. The news media may have increased the ‘publicness’ of the public sphere with its urban, affluent middle class elite orientation of news but it has marginalized if not excluded the rural poor altogether (Mehta, 2015; Sainath, 2004). It is evident in the brazen, unapologetic blurring of boundaries between news and advertising as highlighted by the widely prevalent practice of paid journalism (Thakurta, 2010).

These anxieties about the role of a key democratic institution - the media - grew into alarm when the national mainstream media self-censored several national corruption scandals in the last decade. These scandals of unprecedented proportions elicited
tremendous popular interest. After all, it is a widely held expectation that government failures will be investigated, exposed and put on the agenda for public discussion in a liberal democracy whose media is believed to be largely free and vibrant (Ganguly, 2012). They should have been given blanket coverage by a competitive, polyphonic news media always on the lookout for scoops. The mainstream news media’s silence was in dramatic contrast to online media which reflected intense public interest in these news stories and a sustained critical conversation about pervasive venality in politics. However, the mainstream media’s response to these scandals was to ignore the interest shown by a robust civil society and mobilized public and attempt to black them out.

This indicates far greater pressures than commercial pressures at work that prevented the news media from reporting evidently newsworthy topics and issues. This was illuminated, time and again, in the media’s black out of the Nira Radia tapes (2010), coverage of the leaders of dominant political elite in the run up to the 2014 national elections and reportage of the country’s biggest conglomerate and its plunder of the nation’s natural resources among others. Information about these scandals was readily available online but deliberately ignored by the mainstream media. The media seemed to censor itself without any overt coercive pressures. The neglect of these scandals represented the interests of those at the center of power in the country. It became clear that censorial pressures on the media were significant when confronted by the intersecting interests of the political and economic elite. So significant that the news media threw a shroud of invisibility on these scandals at the risk of losing audiences and all credibility. This cannot be explained by media’s headlong rush towards commercialization alone.

This blanket self-censorship requires an examination of the news media’s relationship with hegemonic power – the dominant political and economic elite. In other words, it requires an interrogation of the relationship between the news media and ruling elite. Thus, this thesis illuminates the constraints on journalistic practice at the intersection of the interests of the political and economic elite through an examination of three case studies – the news media’s self-censorship of the Nira
Radia tapes that exposed the nexus between private capital and the state, the news media’s coverage of the political elite, mainly the Gandhi family and the leader of the Hindu majoritarian political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Narendra Modi, and lastly, the media’s coverage of India’s richest business house Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and its owner Mukesh Ambani. Each of the three case studies represented the interests of those at the center of power and the growing collusion between the state and private capital that has been a mark of the polity’s neoliberal turn (Chandrashekhar, 2014). As such, they exerted significant censorial pressures on the news media not least because of the private ownership and advertising driven business model of journalism. This research seeks to illuminate the range of pressures both overt and covert, at times visible to the public but most times not. Additionally, this research seeks to examine the reasons for these constraints including professional editorial judgment that takes into account accuracy and balance or fear of anticipated punishment or reward.

The media’s self-censorship included national corruption scandals of an unprecedented scale which generated considerable public interest. However, the media’s attempts to black out these scandals could not be sustained and unraveled, albeit briefly, in some cases. An electoral democracy like India with constitutional limits on power and a long history of dialogic contestation in the public sphere circumscribed the media’s self-censorship. This allowed for interstices where the inchoate and polyphonous news media could shake off censorial pressures, often invisible, and exercise its autonomy. A close look at the case studies then raises another question – what are the conditions that enable these windows of autonomy for the news media? What kind of structural cleavages and disjunctions enfeeble these constraints on journalism?

This research seeks to answer these questions through a construction of “actor-oriented” descriptions and an understanding of newsroom editorial processes (Geertz, 1973) and as such, draws upon in-depth interviews with journalists and editors who were privy to and closely involved with the news coverage processes relating to these three case studies. This thesis draws upon interviews with 40 senior journalists
and editors largely in the elite English-language national press based in the national capital of New Delhi and business capital of the country Mumbai. Most of the interviewees had an average experience of 10-15 years in the profession with many of them having worked in both broadcast and print journalism. It also included senior journalists who have been with national newspapers and television news channels but are now with online news media. This enabled piecing together editorial processes and the range of restrictions that were imposed to silence democratic discourse in these three case studies.

The actors’ perspective would help build richer theories about the relationship between journalism and democracy in addition to ensuring agency does not get elided by the macro structure (George, 2013). In multi-lingual India, the norms of the English language press are distinct from the vernacular press and therefore this research is not entirely representative of the multiple norms and traditions of a diverse news media. The differences between the English-language and vernacular press can be so significant that Rajagopal alluded to a “split public” to describe the divide (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 151). At times, this divide has had significant implications for the political processes particularly in the case study that examines media’s coverage of political leaders like Narendra Modi which I have elaborated in that chapter. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that the English language media set the agenda for the case studies examined here and these divisions may be overstated, particularly when examining the news media’s relationship with the ruling elite (Chadha & Koliska, 2016).

Thus, the primary research questions this thesis sought to address were: what happens to journalism at the intersection of the interests of politics, business and media, what are these interrelationships, how do these forces interact and shape news. The institution of the media is deeply enmeshed with others, and dependent on its economic and political milieu (George, 2018). It is shaped by historical, cultural, economic forces. So, if this research seeks to understand and analyze how power and those at the center of it have shaped this institution and vice versa, this thesis has to begin by examining the nature of the Indian state. It analyzes state-capital relations
and how they have played out in relation to and been constitutive of the news media industry. This research teases out the relationships between the institution of journalism, state and capital and how they mutually constitute each other, particularly after 1991 which marked a paradigmatic change in the country’s political economy.

The research employs and draws into dialogue three important theories – political economy, field theory and new institutionalism theory – to map, examine and understand the interplay of interrelationships between the state, capital and media. While field theory enables analysis of how the political, economic and journalistic fields interact and influence each other, new institutional theory helps a better understanding of homogeneity or blanket self-censorship across the news media as witnessed during the three case studies examined here. The instrumental perspectives of political economy like the Propaganda Model enhance our understanding of the junctures when political and economic factors eviscerate journalism of any of its autonomy. As evidenced in the case studies, journalism does become reducible to market forces at times and thus the political economy provides a wide base for the theoretical framework. The three approaches complement each other in providing a theoretical framework adequate to analyze the interaction of macro and micro variables that help explain what drives journalists and the forces that impact journalism.

In Aid of Crony Capitalism

The salient conclusion this research reaches is a disturbing narrative of servitude of the press to the powerful elite particularly when the interests of the political and economic elite are aligned. The external pressures are such that the journalistic field collapses in the overlapping political and economic fields or the field of power. This research, thus argues that field theory needs to reassessed in contexts outside of its origin as frequent transgressions from the field of power have meant that the entrenched pressures have been internalized over time and become constitutive of journalistic practice as we find in all three cases. The result is extensive self-censorship to preempt threats like those of legal action or withdrawal of
advertisements or worse, losing one’s job. This needs to be qualified by saying that the dominance of the ruling class has not been entirely unchallenged but the overarching theme is that of an uncritical, almost deferential, eye on the dominant elite.

On balance, this thesis finds the news media deeply implicated in the neoliberal project. It is not merely embedded in the field of power, it plays an active role in institutionalizing crony capitalism. Faced with competition and challenges from the newly mobilized social actors and groups, the “narrow alliance of the ruling elite on which the Indian polity rests” (Kohli, 2007, p. 112) needs greater effort at maintenance and negotiation. As traditional power relations and hierarchies are challenged in a deepening democracy, the ruling class employs the field of journalism that occupies a unique intermediate position between the state and capital, with access to and proximity to both the political and economic elite, to negotiate power distribution and consolidate their narrow alliance.

Contingent Heteronomy

The other insight about the role news media plays in India’s democratic polity is that it does not merely reflect the socio-cultural, political forces shaping the state. It becomes the site for contestation of myriad, contradictory forces that are pulling the state in different directions. While there is little doubt that democracy has strengthened, become more participatory and inclusive, it is also true that the political democracy has not translated into economic empowerment (Bardhan, 2001; Nayyar, 2001). The polity and economy seem to be pulling in opposing directions and the media becomes the site of contestation of these conflicting forces, often shaping these forces. Growing democratization and politicization of myriad groups in the lower strata of society is in constant tension with accelerating accumulation (Nayyar, 2001). The constant negotiation for power distribution between myriad political actors is often played out in the media.

Thus, macro forces shaping journalism do not always converge which results in fissures in the hegemony exerted by the powerful elite. A divergence between macro forces result in intermittent windows of journalistic autonomy. This conflict arises
from the participatory and inclusive nature of India’s mobilized democracy. A fragmentation of the power structure introduces conflict and competition which briefly reduces the heteronomous pressures on the field of journalism. Dissensus among the elite, new entrants transforming the political culture and the monitorial regulatory institutions of a democratic state are some of the variables that led to a divergence between the interests of the political and economic elite. Situated in its unique intermediate position between the economic and political fields, endowed with symbolic power, the media reflects, mediates and shapes these contradictory forces. Thus, new institutionalist emphasis on retaining the state, much greater than political economy and field theory, and analyzing the media as a political institution holds weight in this context.

Additionally, the unraveling of the media’s silence on these national scandals was enabled by the internal dynamics of the journalistic field. Competition between agents and new entrants’ struggle for recognition within the field also played a role in enabling critical scrutiny of the powerful. Their positions in the field, the cultural and economic capital accumulated converges with journalists’ habitus to contribute to the formation of journalistic agency. It is evident that journalistic agency played a significant role in defying the heteronomous pressures on the field of journalism. Individual acts by intrepid journalists who employed stealth and their accumulated cultural capital took on powerful interests at great risk to themselves and their publications. While political economy and new institutionalism elide agency altogether, this research demonstrates that field theory too underestimates the subversive power of individual agency with an overreliance on structures.

The next chapter does an exhaustive review of the literature that exists on Indian journalism identifying a gap in the existing scholarship that my thesis sets out to research. It outlines the tectonic shift in India’s political economy starting in the 1980s culminating in the 1991 economic restructuring where the polity pivoted from a socialist planned economy to embracing markets and a greater integration with the global economy. It also charts the expansion of the media industry, a consequence of the deregulation of the communication industry resulting in the emergence of one of
the fastest growing sectors of the economy with far reaching political and cultural implications. Following that, I elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings of this research which draws on three major contemporary theoretical approaches – a synthesis of the political economy framework, Bourdieu’s field theory and new institutional theory to provide a framework that is sufficiently sensitive to macro, mezzo and micro levels of analysis of the evidence gathered in chapter three. I set out the reasons for choosing this theoretical architecture, the advantages and shortcomings of each of these theories in providing an analytical framework for the field of journalism. This allows me to outline my research questions to address the gap I identify. This is followed by the chapter on the research methods adopted to gather and analyze the data which include face to face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors who were involved directly in the editorial processes of the reportage in the three case studies chosen. The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling as it was most appropriate to interview journalists with intimate knowledge of the coverage of the issues and events under study. Most journalists had an average of 10-15 years of experience and had in many instances worked in both newspapers and television. Most of the news organizations are central to the national field of journalism in India.

Some of the core questions involved asking journalists and editors how they gathered information on the story, the nature of interventions by their editors and owners, influences and pressures on their work in that particular issue or story, their observations and reflections of the discursive editorial processes among others. The case studies were selected to enable an examination of journalistic processes where the press was tasked with scrutinizing the ruling elite.

The subsequent chapters (5, 6 and 7) are detailed descriptions of the three case studies which are then discussed and analyzed in chapter eight. Chapter five outlines the news media’s self-censorship of the transcripts of lobbyist Nira Radia’s recorded telephone conversations which revealed the extent of the collusion between state, capital and media in subverting democratic practices and enriching each other. This led to a crisis of credibility for the traditional news media as social media articulated
public anger at its complicity in crony capitalism. Chapter six analyzes Indian journalism and its relationship with the political elite with a particular focus on the Gandhi family who have directly or indirectly ruled India for a majority of its independent history as leaders of the Congress party. Their hegemony was such that political scientist Rajni Kothari described the polity as the ‘Congress System’ (Kothari, 1964). This case study also looks at the rise and election of the BJP’s authoritarian leader Narendra Modi and the control he has exerted over the media. Chapter seven outlines the final case study about the media’s relationship with private capital by examining its coverage of the country’s richest business man and private company Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and the circumstances that culminated in the company taking over the country’s biggest media house TV18 around the time BJP leader Narendra Modi was elected Prime Minister in 2014.

Chapter eight discusses and analyses the overarching themes and findings common to all the three case studies. This is followed by summing up the insights and predominant conclusions in the final chapter.
Chapter 2

The Indian Context

The Indian Political Economy and Liberalization

India’s survival as a democracy with seventeen free and fair elections has confounded political scientists. Barring a fleeting authoritarian spell, there are signs that democracy has taken deep root in the country (Varshney, 2000). India’s political economy underwent dramatic transformation with economic restructuring in 1991 that has led to real economic dynamism and growth rates that outpace China (Ganguly, 2014). The result of nearly three decades of liberalization has been that the country now has the fourth largest concentration of billionaires, the third largest middle class and the largest population that lives in poverty (Varshney, 2017).

Universal franchise has empowered its citizens politically while growing economic disparities have been disempowering (Varshney, 2000). The polity’s recent drift towards Hindu majoritarianism and religious intolerance have added to the enduring social and economic cleavages. Broadly, this thesis attempts to examine a key democratic institution – journalism – to explore the role it plays in the polity.

This research begins by examining the deeper structural features of the polity and their transformation due to economic liberalization. India’s pivot from its statist economic policy and left-leaning, socialist rhetoric to an embrace of capital as the main ruling ally began a decade before economic restructuring in 1991 (Kohli, 2007; Bardhan, 2001; Corbridge & Harriss, 2000). Here, political scientists make a distinction between a pro-market and pro-business orientation arguing that the Indian state promoted indigenous business rather than enabling a level playing field for new entrants and consumers as a pro-market polity would do (Kohli, 2007; Rodrick & Subramanian, 2005). The 1980s was marked by a shift in the state’s developmental goal from distributive justice to economic growth. Structural restructuring undertaken in 1991 was a dramatic departure from the past (Kohli, 2007). Chibber and Usmani make the case that India has become more pro-business but that is from a baseline that was already high prior to 1991 (Chibber & Usmani, 2012). What
changed was India’s place in the world and intensified encounter with global capital (Bardhan, 2001).

Broadly, Kohli contends that the development model pursued by the Indian state rests on a “narrow ruling alliance of the political and economic elite” (Kohli, 2007, p. 112). Crony capitalism or a polity where those close to political policymakers receive favors allowing them to earn returns far above market value has been a salient and persistent characteristic of India resulting in accumulation of extreme wealth (Gandhi & Walton, 2012). Although dismantling the ‘license-quota Raj’ (Pendakur, 2013), synonymous with corrupt state power introduced competition, there has been a greater convergence of the political and economic interests with the ruling elite vying for state’s resources (Kohli, 2001). There is no serious disagreement with the view that economic liberalization shifted the balance of power towards private capital, mostly domestic capital rather than foreign capital (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). However, there is a debate on the extent and nature of the power of business within the Indian state (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). Does business occupy a hegemonic status and if so, how does it shape political and social change? While Kohli argues that business’s influence post liberalization has grown dramatically, some assert that business holds the veto power (Kohli, 2007; Chandrasekhar, 2014).

However, Kohli reminds us that the state has been highly interventionist in nature playing a crucial role in the shaping of political and social changes in India (Kohli, 2001). Political variables such as “electoral competition, the weakness of political parties, the role of leaders, and the virulent competition over state-controlled economic resources” have been and continue to be constitutive of transformation in journalism in the country (Kohli, 2001, p. 142). Post liberalization too, the state has played a central role in privatizing national resources, usually at a substantial loss to the nation, redistributing them to a small elite, leading to allegations of state capture by big business (Chandrasekhar, 2014). The state has publicly declared its role is to facilitate business rather than regulate it. Bardhan argues that the implied state retreat is a myth with a transformation in the nature of state intervention encouraging
cronyism (Bardhan, 2001; Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). Overall, there seems a consensus on business increasing its power such that it is dictating public policy.

However, all of this has unfolded within the framework of democracy where everyone is enfranchised and has a vote. “There is an absolute institutionalization of adult franchise which is irreversible. For another, democracy which was provided largely from above, is now being claimed increasingly from below by the people” (Nayyar, 2001, p. 370). Greater social equality and political empowerment have deepened and broadened democracy (Varshney, 2000). Lower castes that constituted a majority of the population have challenged traditional forms of clientelistic politics denting the socioeconomic structures of power and privilege. Electoral democracy has led to growing democratization of traditional power relations in civil society and proliferation of competition for the state’s resources (Kohli, 2001).

However, political democracy has not brought about economic democracy with growing inequality as a consequence of India’s neoliberal shift. The state has failed the subaltern at the level of providing basic education and healthcare. Economic growth has been accompanied by growing concentration of ownership in private capital, stagnation in employment in manufacturing, surge in profit margins for private businesses resulting in widening income inequality (Kohli, 2007; Chandrasekhar, 2014). Overall poverty is diminishing but very slowly (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). Deepak Nayyar encapsulates it by asserting that the “economics of liberalization and the politics of empowerment seem to be moving the economy and the polity in opposite directions” (Nayyar, 2001, p. 362). In other words, there is persistent tension between politics which is empowering citizens and acceleration in concentration of wealth. The contestation between the two has significant implications for the media as these two opposing forces not only get reflected in the news media but also shaped by the media.

The 1990s marked a paradigm shift in India, turning it from an inward looking, highly regulated economy to a more open system. This was accompanied by a distinct ideological change in the state’s attitude towards capital accumulation allowing big business to become bigger and richer (Athique, 2012). Economic
reforms had the imprint of the country’s interest group structure with rules of the transition accommodating the political and economic elites (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000; Jenkins, 1999) and benefiting companies like Reliance which had already generated oceans of profit from the era of state subsidy and patronage before liberalization (Kohli, 2007; Chibber & Usmani, 2012). Bardhan warns that outward appearances notwithstanding, “one should not underestimate the enormity and tenacity of vested interests in the preservation of the old political equilibrium of subsidies and patronage distribution. Matters are further complicated by evolving democratic forces, unleashed in an extremely hierarchical and heterogeneous society” (Bardhan, 2001, p. 408). The reforms were partial, excluding the poor and enfeebling those state institutions that could have provided redressal to those excluded (Oza, 2006). They eulogized private wealth accumulation and engendered the perception that the poor are responsible for their own plight (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000). This had implications for India’s political economic arc, with the media largely owned by dominant capitalists, playing a salient role in providing cultural legitimacy for the dramatic growth of the power of business (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019).

Thus, I would posit what began as liberalization of the stifling controls in the political economy to unfetter domestic business in the 1980s transitioned in the 1990s to the economic paradigm of neoliberalism that was growing its footprint around the world. Here, I borrow McChesney’s definition of neoliberalism to clarify a concept that has been interpreted variously and loosely. “A set of national and international policies that call for business domination of all social affairs with minimum countervailing force. Governments are to remain large so as to serve corporate interests, while minimizing any activities that might undermine the rule of business and the wealthy. Neoliberalism is almost always intertwined with a deep belief in the ability of the markets to use new technologies to solve social problems better than any alternative course. The centerpiece of neoliberal policies is invariably a call for commercial media and communication markets to be deregulated. What this means in practice is ‘re-regulated’ to serve corporate interests” (McChesney, 2001, p. 2).
A financial crisis in 1991 provided the catalyst for International Monetary Fund-dictated changes in trade, infrastructure, and industrial policies in the Indian economy (Mukherji, 2009). Thus, the Indian state introduced a paradigmatic shift in the economy toward a market economy underpinned by global economic integration which has led to a dramatically increased economic growth rate of 6 percent since 1992 (Rao S., 2016). If this growth rate continues, India will be an 80 billion US dollar economy and the world’s third largest by 2020 (Sharma, 2009).

Concomitantly, India was nudged into relinquishing its monopolistic national control over broadcasting and telecommunication industries. The Indian state surrendered its 45-year old monopoly over communications, allowing private sector participation (Mody, 1995), and embracing a neo liberal ideology like many other Asian countries. However, this process of liberalization in India was marked by little public knowledge or debate and a very “narrow support base” (Kohli-Khandekar, 2006, p. 1354). In fact, political scientist Rob Jenkins describes the process of opening up of the economy as a process of “reform by stealth” where crucial decisions were taken outside the framework of deliberative democracy (Jenkins, 1999). The adoption of neo-liberal ideology was largely forced by the bureaucrats in the World Bank and IMF, and pushed through with the support of the urban elite in India. This had a direct impact on media liberalization that unfolded in an ad hoc and arbitrary manner with capitalists lobbying state officials for concessions and favorable policy decisions (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013, p. 353). The opening up of the market led to a dramatic proliferation of the news media in the last two decades in spite of the absence of a coherent policy or blueprint to liberalize media (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013). Robert McChesney attributes the rise of neoliberalism as a major factor that has led to a corporate media boom on the one hand and the collapse of democratic political life on the other, an ideology associated with the rise of Reagan and Thatcher in the early 1980s that was later treated as a panacea for all the ills afflicting developing countries (McChesney, 2001).
Trajectory and Evolution of the Indian media post Liberalization

Deregulation of the communication industries that resulted in exponential growth of the Indian media industry, a result of the economic liberalization in 1991, has been well documented, making it one of the biggest and fastest growing in the world (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; Athique, 2012; Kohli-Khandekar, 2006; Mehta, 2008; Ninan, 2007; Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2013; Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010; Thussu, 2007). This included a revival of the film industry, information technology and mobile telephony. There was a concomitant and significant expansion in the field of advertising and marketing (Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010). Deregulation of the media sector facilitated the proliferation of privately controlled satellite television channels, making India home to both the largest concentration of 24 hour news channels in the world and more than 90,000 newspapers in 20 languages (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015).

Thussu describes how dramatic the changes in the media landscape has been and why they hold appeal for global media conglomerates. From “one television channel, Doordarshan, a notoriously monotonous and unimaginative state monopoly which was uncharitably labelled as a mouthpiece of the government of the day” to one of the world’s largest television markets constituted by an “increasingly Westernized, middle-class audience of 300 million, with growing purchasing power and aspirations to a consumerist lifestyle” in addition to a 24 million large South Asian diaspora (Thussu D. K., 2007, p. 594). It is worth remembering that the evolution of print and broadcast were distinct after independence in 1947 with Indian print journalism allowed to develop unfettered, but broadcasting controlled by the postcolonial state (Rao S., 2008).

Numbers do not always tell the entire story but they do give an idea of the contours and scale of the news media in India as outlined by one of the best-known media observers in the country, Vanita Kohli-Khandekar. The daily sales of newspapers in India, more than one hundred million copies, are second only to that of China. Unlike the West, they continue to grow – growth in literacy being one of the reasons. The country has strong national brands in English, Hindi and regional languages and
most of the growth in the print industry is arising in Hindi and the many vernacular language titles, or regional and sub-regional editions of existing newspaper chains (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2013). The media landscape is divided along linguistic and regional lines such that Rajagopal famously alluded to it as a ‘split public’ (Rajagopal, 2001). The booming Hindi news media has successfully challenged the dominance of the anglicized, upper caste elite who constituted the bulk of the powerful English language press, fashioning an alternative public discourse for the hitherto marginalized groups (Varshney, 2000; Neyazi, 2011). Sevanti Ninan, who has done extensive research on Hindi newspaper journalism, observes that Hindi newspaper journalism is market-driven, “reader rather than editor driven” (Ninan, 2007, p. 32).

There are several factors that have fueled this growth – rising incomes, literacy and changing technology - are among some of the predominant ones. One of the foremost enabling factors has been the growth of a consumer economy, a direct result of liberalization. Advertising is central to a consumer economy and the dramatic growth in advertising was a key driver of media’s expansion as was the media in promoting consumerism – a virtual quid pro quo (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). Not surprisingly, the advertising industry is one of the fastest growing in the world and contributes two-thirds of the revenues of print and broadcast media (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019; Chakravartty & Roy, 2015).

Today, more than 60 percent of the country’s population has access to television channels (FICCI-EY, 2018). While television remains the most powerful and accessible mass media, internet penetration has witnessed remarkable growth. More than 350 million Indians have access to the internet second only to China (Cain, 2017). “Indians now spend 12 percent of their disposable income on media and entertainment. There is a hunger for news, and an appetite for home entertainment. And underlying the growing prominence of subaltern India, so to speak, much of the growth is in the vernacular languages, where the media is also beginning to attract more of the advertising money” (Ninan, 2011).
Despite being bottom line focused, Sevanti Ninan argues newspapers particularly in Hindi and regional languages have played a pivotal role in creating grassroots political awareness and participation. “Newspapers brought increased awareness, a growing consumerism, and civic participation in their wake, and no one was left untouched. Readers, civil society, politicians, panchayats all experienced a media saturation that was as rapid as it was new” (Ninan, 2007, p. 13). Thus, the expansion of the media is implicated in the country’s political and socio-cultural processes.

It was in the mid-90s that newspapers in India started going digital. The websites of these newspapers would initially be a digital replica of print copies but this changed with the arrival of Web 2.0 when the Web editions of these newspapers became dedicated news sites (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2013). Interestingly, print media still commands a greater share in the country’s advertising revenue with India being the fastest growing among all the major advertising markets of the world (Choudhary, 2016). In this, English language media, both print and television, command a disproportionate share of advertising revenue as they are targeted at the more affluent sections of the population but the reach and circulation of Hindi and vernacular language media is far greater (Rodrigues, 2010).

The Great Television Bazaar

The break with the past has been the most dramatic in the television arena. Indian viewers only had access to one television channel, the state broadcaster, Doordarshan, largely a propaganda arm of the government in power, till as late as 1991. But all that changed with the entry of satellite television and India became home to perhaps the largest concentration of 24-hour television news networks in the world (Mehta, 2008).

One of the most visible manifestations of the privatization of news was the amount of airtime given to the corporate sector and stock market (Thussu D. K., 2007). A media commentator P. Sainath describes the commercial media as “McMedia” that gave saturation coverage to the fall in value of the Indian stock market at the expense of far more significant issues (Sainath, 2004). “In three days, the big media gave the ‘suffering' in the stock market more space than they had to thousands of farmers'
suicides in the past few years. Never mind that two-thirds of our people depend on agriculture. Or that just 1.15 percent of India's 180 million households invest in stocks” (Sainath, 2004). Intense commercialization has led to tabloidization of news or infotainment with significant implications for public discourse and democratic consolidation (Thussu D. K., 2007).

In spite of commercialization and its consequent pressures, scholars like Mehta argue that the emergence of television news networks has strengthened deliberative democracy in India, giving a “new publicness to the country’s culture of debate and dissent” (Mehta, 2008, p. 9). “The capitalists who led the move towards private satellite broadcasting in India did not do it for altruistic reasons – their objective was to make money – but their efforts have led to the creation of newer nodes of public action and publicness. Television has been adapted by Indian society – by entrepreneurs, by its producers and by its consumers – to suit its own needs” (Mehta, 2008, p. 9). Perhaps no other comment has articulated the centrality of television in the social, cultural, political processes of the country as this comment by one of India’s best known broadcast journalists Rajdeep Sardesai, “The television picture and sound-bite has been one of the most dramatic political developments in the last sixteen years….mutually competitive 24 hour news networks are the most direct participants in public processes: not only do they amplify the news, they also influence it” (Sardesai, 2006). Evidently, more and more people rely on television rather than print to get their political information according to a survey by Lokniti which shows that 43 percent watch TV daily for news whereas only 28 percent rely on newspapers (Palshikar, 2014).

Mehta has an optimistic view on how television has strengthened democratic politics by feeding off India’s older cultures and traditions of debate and argumentativeness tapping into subaltern modes of communication (Mehta, 2008). He argues that these processes have Indianized television with significant implications for politics and society. He goes as far as to posit that any understanding of modern India without reference to television would only be partial. There can be no doubt that pervasive television news has acquired a crucial dimension in political processes in India’s
mobilized democracy (Thussu D. K., 2007). Rajagopal makes a persuasive intervention in demonstrating how media, particularly television that allows for swift mobilization, fashioned the creation of a single imagined national culture to enable the recent rise of political Hindu nationalism (Rajagopal, 2001). Thussu contends that an ethnocentric television news has contributed to shaping public discourse significantly but has undermined the quality of this discourse predating it on infotainment (Thussu D. K., 2007). Udupa warns against reading the media expansion as dichotomous – either market driven commodification of news only serving the private capital or media-enabled civic participation (Udupa, 2012). She argues that we need to understand the complexity of the existence of both.

As a major beneficiary of ‘reforms’, the media became a vocal cheerleader for economic restructuring and the neoliberal transformation of the political economy of the country (Athique, 2012; Thussu D. K., 2007). Athique highlights the salient role the expanding commercial media has played in diffusing and spreading a wider narrative that portrays India as ‘shining’, ‘rising’, ‘poised’ or other similar descriptions eliding the growing wealth disparity (Athique, 2012).

Globalization diminishes perceived control over cultural and national identity which in turn leads to attempts to reclaim that control by political groups claiming to be the keepers of the nation’s cultural and national identity. Rajagopal asserts it is no coincidence that the rise of Hindu nationalism took place in the context of economic liberalization since both share the technology of communication, namely television (Rajagopal, 2001). Religious-cultural politics became conspicuous in a context where liberalization promoted and endorsed the aspiring middle classes newly found right to consume, business elites sought a successor to the command economy in eclipse, and communication technologies expanded political participation and mobilization of the subaltern looking for meaningful political engagement (Rajagopal, 2001). Neoliberalism usually coincides with the rise of right-wing political parties as it did in India in the form of the rise of the majoritarian, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Oza, 2006). The 2014 national elections took place in a media saturated environment unprecedented for India with the media
reshaping “the context in which politics is conceived, enacted and understood” (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 1). This cultural parochialism conflicts with internationalization and globalization unleashed by the structural break in 1991, a contest that has played out in the mass media and shaped it in turn.

Globalization of the media has led to a rise of an entertainment-oriented news agenda, sensationalism and commodification of news (Thussu, 2007). Thussu documents the tabloid style emphasis on cricket, crime and cinema, the three popular subjects that resonate with Indians (Thussu D., 2009). As a result, there is an increasing disconnect between the lives of millions of ordinary Indians and the picture purveyed by mass media seduced by the promises of the free market. For example, Sainath reported that only six national accredited journalists covered the unprecedented agricultural crisis in 2005-2006 while 412 accredited journalists covered the India Fashion Week held in Mumbai (Sainath, 2006). A consumer economy and advertising finance and drive the media. The result is the poor and disempowered which is the vast majority are made to seem peripheral in the state.

Globalization has wrought dramatic changes on contemporary practices of Indian journalism, some for the better. Rao contends these practices “are being shaped by Western and global approaches characterized by a dramatic rise in the integration of information technologies in newsgathering processes, the systematic collection of audience feedback, and an increased professional training of journalism students” (Rao S., 2009, p. 479). She asserts globalization has strengthened the local and democratized the relationship between journalists and the reader/viewer. The impact of globalization on news in India, when understood as glocalization, can be interpreted as a set of practices in which the local media have absorbed the global, rejuvenated the local, and given audiences possibilities of strengthening democratic discourse (Rao, 2009). This has helped impart global journalistic norms such as impartiality and independence to Indian journalism particularly in the Western educated English language journalists. However, these collide and intersect with commercial and other pressures in complex ways. Ursula Rao argues against any simplistic reading of the practices in a neoliberal environment describing political
reporting as a contradictory practice of personal empowerment through selective reflexivity navigating myriad pressures (Rao, 2010).

The changes in Indian media including journalism have been so dramatic and often contradictory in nature that scholarship has lagged far behind.

### Media Ownership

A recent report of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) released in 2014 identifies media ownership as the primary area of concern. “The Authority is of the opinion that the principal matters of concern here relate to and derive from the political and corporate ownership of the media. The issues of paid news; self-censorship; limited editorial independence; invasion of privacy etc., are consequences of such unrestricted ownership and the crass commercialization that has overtaken the media because of political and corporate ownership. Hence, the Authority finds that it is of utmost importance to first regulate such ownership to the extent practical before addressing other related issues” (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2014). Several such recommendations on the issue have come to nothing. The state’s efforts to regulate media ownership have been episodic and largely ineffectual (Thomas, 2014).

The media in India has largely been privately owned. The big newspaper groups have historically had large circulations and been family owned. Television was controlled by the state till liberalization but then expanded at an almost exponential pace. Family controlled media houses have moved towards corporatization with the old owners retaining control while new kinds of owners have entered the media landscape particularly television (Reddy, 2019). The entry of both foreign media conglomerates and large Indian business entities like the Ambanis and Tatas since deregulation has led the corporatization of the family owned media companies (Ninan S., 2007).

Media companies grew so rapidly in the aftermath of liberalization that they found themselves facing a weak financial position when the global financial recession hit in 2007-2008 leaving some of the biggest media companies scrambling desperately for
investors (Thakurta, 2012). This made it easy for some big businesses to acquire a media footprint ostensibly to gain and control digital content for their telecom networks (Reddy, 2019). The most high profile example of this was the taking over of India’s biggest media house by India’s richest private company Reliance, raising fears about “growing concentration of ownership in an oligopolistic market that could lead to loss of media heterogeneity and plurality” (Thakurta, 2012). The entire financial transaction was carried out in a deliberately complex and surreptitious manner.

Media ownership in large part is a shadowy world in India. Saeed focuses on the fraudulent transactions and corrupt practices that mark media ownership undergirded by a nexus between the corporate world and political class (Saeed, 2015). This has significant implications for the news media’s criticality and editorial independence. Even the most trusted names in the media business like NDTV were found to be indebted to Reliance and its owners the Ambani family. Although NDTV is a publicly listed company and thus its financial details should be in the public domain, an investigative report detailed how Reliance had channeled money to NDTV in a roundabout way through proxy companies to avoid this becoming public (Saikia, 2015). Opacity in the funding structure obscures proxy media ownership which in turn masks the manipulation of the media by crony capitalism (Saeed, 2015). And the ownership by corporate and political interests impairs the media’s ability to hold them accountable.

The image of a free-wheeling competitive media market may conceal monopolistic practices with powerful media corporations protecting vested interests. Undoubtedly, transformative and democratizing in some ways, yet, political and economic elites have attempted to maintain control over the media narrative in direct and indirect ways. New entrepreneurs with dubious motives and funding proliferate the field. Chakravartty and Roy argue that certain distinctive structural features of the current Indian news industry can be outlined that have been shaped by the distinctive trajectory of the media liberalization (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013). They point to the non-consolidated structure of the commercial media landscape, extra-economic
logics or logics that can’t be explained by commercial and profit motives alone, interplay of formal and informal capital in the media field as well as the presence of speculative forms of capital (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013, pp. 355-56). Thomas argues that the trend has been to celebrate the media’s expansion in the context of globalizing India at the expense of critiquing it and hence, there is a pressing need to critically evaluate the new sources of power in the media as it evolves.

**Paid News Journalism**

The Press Council of India, a statutory body that monitors the conduct of the print media commissioned a report after receiving complaints about the paid news phenomenon being widespread during the 2009 national elections. The following is an excerpt from it which they chose eventually not to publish in its entirety, publishing a watered-down version instead. It is a harsh indictment of the health of the Indian news media. ‘Hyper-commercialization’ has also brought forth the phenomenon of ‘paid news’ or journalists and media outlets extorting or charging money to pass advertising off as news. “After the elections, a disturbing trend was highlighted by sections of the media, that is, payment of money by candidates to representatives of media companies for favorable coverage or the phenomenon popularly known as ‘paid news’….The phenomenon of ‘paid news’ goes beyond the corruption of individual journalists and media companies. It has become pervasive, structured and highly organized and in the process, is undermining democracy in India” (Thakurta & Reddy, 2010).

Rao draws equivalence between the practice of red envelope journalism in China and the paid news phenomenon in India as equally pervasive examples of media corruption (Rao S., 2016). In India, paid news was pioneered by the largest circulated English national daily *The Times of India*. It skewed the entire field of journalism in the country with a race to squeeze ever greater profits. The newspaper’s owner Samir Jain is famously quoted to have said they were in the advertising business and not journalism (Auletta, 2012). Advertisements account for two thirds of newspapers revenues with the disappearance of a broader trend of the Chinese wall between editorial and advertising. A recent undercover investigation
revealed how most major media houses were willing to mask Hindu nationalist propaganda as news for the right amount of money (Ravi, 2018). The media boom has not been accompanied by ethical journalistic practices, resulting in a serious decline in the media’s credibility (Rao S., 2016).

Ownership and advertising exert significant heteronomous pressures on the commercial media. This means that owners prioritize profits over quality and concern for public interest. Both ensure a powerful tendency for the press to adopt a generally pro-business perspective. The role and power of private capital has increased dramatically since liberalization and it almost seems as if this narrow group holds the veto power threatening to transform Indian democracy into an oligarchy (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). As a result, the mass media have tended to scrutinize mainly government agencies and political actors, practically turning a blind eye to the power wielded by business. This is the reason scholars characterize the media as “Janus faced”— monitorial and questioning on some issues while being deferential and submissive on other political and economic issues (Reddy, 2019).

What India has been witnessing is the state giving up its role of regulating business. Instead, the state has facilitated private capital in accumulation. Political scientists assert that India’s rapid growth has been steered by a narrow alliance of the state and business (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). The media has tended to shield the political and business elite, furthering their interests even if it means ignoring public interest. Nowhere has this coming together of corporate and political interests been more evident than in the 2014 national elections which led to an unprecedented win for a religious right-wing party whose leader is alleged to have authoritarian tendencies. “Narendra Modi is probably the first Indian prime minister openly anointed by leaders of the business community” (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019).

**Legal Framework**

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution of India to all citizens under Article 19 (1) (a) but this is circumscribed by "reasonable restrictions". However, there is no consensus on what constitutes "reasonable"
restrictions and/or who or which body should determine these. In practice however, these legal protections have been infringed upon by various influential stakeholders like political actors or business. Several colonial era laws have been used to restrict media freedom. The state has resorted to using these laws when it felt threatened. There have been several examples of the government’s use of national security concerns to incarcerate journalists and stifle freedom of the press. In 2012, freelance cartoonist Aseem Trivedi was arrested and charged with several offenses, including sedition, for publishing cartoons on his website that allegedly mocked national symbols and criticized government officials for corruption.

Powerful politicians and business have used the criminal defamation law to halt publication of material critical of them. This is best exemplified by former national government minister Praful Patel slapping a defamation case against the publisher Bloomsbury in 2013 to withdraw its publication of a book that was highly critical of his handling of the national airlines Air India. Corporate houses have commonly used legal notices to prevent media outlets from reporting anything negative about them.

The regulatory framework for mass media is almost nonexistent. Conspicuous absence of antitrust laws has resulted in the monopolies and concentrations in several industries including the media (Thomas, 2014). Media ownership is subject to almost no effective, independent press and/or broadcast regulatory regime. Neither is there cross-media ownership regulation in India. Concentrations of cross-media ownership in the regional language markets, particularly in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala are significant with relatively less concentration in media ownership in the more national Hindi and English markets (Thomas, 2014). Instrumentalization of regional media by political parties is salient (Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010). Padmaja Shaw’s empirical research has highlighted the links between dominant castes, political parties and ownership of the media in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh (Shaw, 2009).

“Lack of cross-media ownership laws and regulations and pressure of advertising revenues have created an environment which is obsessively focused on ratings and
profits. The daunting challenge for journalists and media owners has been to balance the pressures of capitalism with the need for democracy” (Rao, 2016, p. 4). Observed more in the breach than in spirit are some ethics guidelines provided to Indian journalists and media owners by the statutory quasi-judicial administrative body of Press Council of India which is not immune to pressure from powerful media lobbies as was seen in the burial of the paid news report (Rao S., 2016). The Press Council deals only with print and has no punitive teeth. Television broadcasters have self-regulatory bodies, News Broadcasting Standards Authority and Broadcast Content Complaints Council, both of which have also done little by way of enforcing regulations in the years they have been operational (Reddy, 2019).

All these factors combine to make journalistic practice a fraught exercise in the Indian context with journalists having almost no recourse to self-defense. Of late, the culture of impunity and intolerance promoted by the Hindu right has made India far more dangerous for journalists. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen describes the deterioration in press freedom as a “creeping quiet” that is taking over the Indian press with instances of journalists killed for being critical of authority and powerful interests (Nielsen, 2017). More than 40 journalists have been killed in India since 1992, according to the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (AFP, 2018). The murder of Gauri Lankesh in 2017 shook the liberal establishment of the country. She was a well-known critic of right-wing extremism and the political establishment. She was gunned down in front of her home with fourteen suspects arrested for her murder. The media watchdog website The Hoot observes a clear and consistent pattern in journalists’ killing. "The data with The Hoot shows that law-makers and law-enforcers are the prime culprits in the attacks and threats on the media" (Seshu, 2017). The editor of the well-reputed newspaper Rising Kashmir, Shujaat Bukhari, was killed in 2018 as he left his office in the Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir state (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). The overall picture is one of growing constraints on freedom of speech where the lives of journalists who dissent or simply do not agree with those in power is in peril. “To have an opinion today — especially one that does not fit into the dominant political narrative — is to be in the line of danger. A study by Reporters without Borders recognizes that in some
countries, including India, “the line separating verbal violence from physical violence is dissolving” (Dutt, 2018). Dutt alludes to the armies of trolls loyal to the Hindu nationalist incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who subject journalists and other liberal actors to online hate campaigns and harassment (AFP, 2018).

**Journalism and Democracy**

The changes have been so rapid that scholarship on the implications of this transformation for the democratic structure have lagged far behind. In the literature that has attempted to examine Indian journalism and the role it plays in democratization, there seems to be consensus that profits animate and drive the commercial media rather than public interest. Economic restructuring denoting an even greater role and power of business in the Indian polity means the state is allying itself with indigenous big business (Kohli, 2001). The state has socialist rhetoric to serve the interests of ‘India incorporated’ resulting in rapid economic growth that excludes the poor and marginalized. The growing power of business seems to have recruited the media to act as enablers and cheerleaders in their project of greater and greater accumulation. In their account, a globalized and privatized media is implicated in perpetuating this exclusion of the voice of the majority (Rao & Wasserman, 2015, p. 651). Apparent plurality and noise of news media obscures growing sensationalism, trivialization of issues and increasing self-censorship, enfeebling the public sphere thus contributing to a ‘democratic deficit’ (Thussu, 2009).

However, even those that agree with this thesis argue that it is not such a linear and clear-cut picture. The news media has been instrumentalized by capital jettisoning the watchdog role the press is normatively meant to play in a democracy, and yet, there are spaces of democratic debate and critical resistance by the marginalized in the media (Rao & Mudgal, 2015; Saeed, 2015). They argue that liberalization has led to an expansion of civil society and the democratic public sphere constituted by disparate movements and voices and the media has often collaborated with them (Rao & Mudgal, 2015). Mehta adds that private television inserted a new factor in the societal matrix greatly enhancing deliberative democracy (Mehta, 2015).
Rao underscores a contradictory role played by the globalized Indian media. She argues that market pressures have accentuated commercialization and infotainment and yet, they have also created possibilities for broadcast journalism to demand government accountability and voice the concerns of the disempowered. She argues that liberalization and the proliferation of 24-hour news channels has created a complex environment that defies straightforward explanations (Rao S., 2008). It has enabled professional practice such that the media plays a watchdog role to some extent particularly in exposing and highlighting corruption. She argues the media has played an advocacy role despite substantial commercial pressures on it underscoring ‘contradictory implications’ of globalization (Rao, 2008). Yet, a 30-day content analysis of the reporting priorities of the front pages in the four most influential English language dailies done in 2010 found that there was very little commitment to investigative reportage with greater focus on crime, legal followed by political reportage (Murthy, et al., 2010). Proliferating communication technologies have increased political participation and expanded the public sphere. This contrasts with the increasing censorship in the news media making the relationship between democracy and journalism far more contentious and conflicted in the Indian context.

Neoliberal restructuring has fundamentally modified journalists’ professional ecology contends Rao in her ethnographic study of journalism practices in India (Rao U., 2010). As political structures become less important revenue generators for the news media, the press is more willing to hold political actors accountable and expose their wrongdoing. But the tradeoff is that the press is more obsequious to business as dependence on them for revenues has increased (Rao U., 2010).

However, Ursula Rao argues against looking for a clear departure between pre-liberalization and post-liberalization journalistic practice (Rao U., 2010). This shift is not that clear cut in a polity with interpenetrating business and political interests. Politics, private capital and media’s overriding commercial concerns interact in myriad subtle and complex ways (Ranganathan, 2014). Disjuncture between politics and business result in space for democratic dissent as was evidenced in the rise of the AamAadmi or Common Man party that exposed crony capitalism among powerful
interests in the country and the media’s co-option by them. Ranganathan argues that mainstream media’s corporatization pushed democratic discourse on to social media in the 2014 national elections (Ranganathan, 2014).

There is scholarship that has examined the resulting transformation in the business of the news media, news culture and journalistic practices (Mehta, 2008; Rao & Mudgal, 2015; Rao & Wasserman, 2015). Yet, there is a deficit in critical interrogation of the nature of relationships that might obtain between state power, neoliberal media and private capital (Rao, 2016; Thomas, 2014). Rao and Mudgal underline the urgent need to study the journalistic practices of one of the world’s largest media and the role journalism plays in consolidating democratic institutions (Rao & Mudgal, 2015). There is a research gap in examining the “neoliberal nexus between government, corporate world, and media owners” that undergirds the power structure (Rao, 2016, p. 14). Disturbingly, there are concerns that this nexus between politics, business and media owners helped elect the authoritarian leader at the helm of the country, Narendra Modi (Rao & Mudgal, 2015). The existing literature does not adequately address the interrelationships between journalism and the power structure embodied by the political and economic elite. It does not investigate and examine how the deeper structures of the Indian polity shape and in turn get influenced by the news media. As a result, what role does journalism play in a crony capitalist polity and why?

It is this challenge that this thesis takes up – 1) illuminating journalistic practice at the intersection of political and economic interests 2) examining the role journalism plays in democratic consolidation in the Indian context.
Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

Political Economy

It is not possible to understand the interrelationships between journalism and state and business, the macro influences on journalistic practice and output – its implications on the role of journalism in democratic consolidation – without an understanding of ‘deeper structures’. The most obvious connections between these deeper structures in both polity and news media are understood through the political economy approach and therefore the PE perspective provides a bedrock for this thesis. Political economy is a major perspective in communication research since the 1940s and has a wide range of approaches all of which are united in looking at the big picture of society (Mosco, 2009, pp. 1-2). Broadly, a political economist of communication asks: How does the system of mass media affect power and wealth and how, in turn, does it get changed by them (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). The questions help answer the larger question that this research seeks to answer – what are the interrelationships between power and journalism? Does journalism in India help augment extant structures of power or help distribute that power more equally in a democratic society?

While there developed many strains in this perspective, perhaps the most prominent has been Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model (1988). American scholars Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, believe that privately owned media are instruments of class domination providing empirical evidence in their book Manufacturing Consent of how economic dynamics do in fact largely determine media content (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). They illustrated this by using several case studies of coverage of events and issues in the US to argue that the American media was as much of a propaganda machine, albeit without external censors, as were the media in totalitarian regimes.
“Perhaps this is an obvious point, but the democratic postulate is that media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived. Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria, and they have support for this contention within the intellectual community. If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to ‘manage’ public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xi).

The case studies chosen to examine the relationship between power and journalism in this research suggest, prima facie, that the powerful are able to circumscribe the discourse particularly where their interests were at stake. They are in a position to decide what information will circulate and what will be silenced.

Herman and Chomsky conceptualized the Propaganda Model (PM) which proposes that the media in the US regularly serves the interests of the dominant elite. They underscore the structural factors that determine the broad contours of the American mass media. They conceptualize a set of five news ‘filters’ that explain the performance and work of the media in serving the ends of the dominant elite. These are – ownership, advertising, sources, flak and a dominant ideology – central to our understanding of what shapes news. This mutually reinforcing system explains "the routes by which money and power" are able to filter the news, marginalize dissent, and dominate access (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 2). Their model does not imply that the media is incapable of reflecting debate. They assert that this system allows for criticism and dissent but within acceptable limits thereby giving the appearance of a diverse and pluralist media.

Among the many critiques from both the left and the right, Sparks (2007) challenged Herman and Chomsky’s claims about elite consensus/dissensus contending that the capitalist class is not always united and that the economic and political systems of many other countries are quite different from those of the US (on which the original PM was based). Taking the example of Europe, Sparks highlighted the significant
presence of left-wing parties, the strong role of public service broadcasters, working-
class electorates with a strong electoral influence, and the existence of competitive
press markets paralleling partisan and socially stratified polities. As a consequence
of these, Sparks argued that “we would expect to find … a much wider and far-
ranging set of arguments in the media than simply in-house disputes between
different wings of the capitalist class” (Sparks, 2007, p. 74).

Herman and Chomsky conceded that the propaganda system did not work as
efficiently where there was dissensus: “… the mass media are not a solid monolith
on all issues. Where the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain
diversity of tactical judgments on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in
media debate” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xii). Thus, they developed the political
economy approach further by providing us analytical tools many of which can be
applied to the Indian media. For example, replacing communism with neo-liberalism
as an all-encompassing ideology that has shaped the media since the opening up of
the Indian economy in 1991 is very useful. The global ideological turn and the
media’s uncritical embrace of it made economic reforms seem inevitable and the sole
alternative to what was seen as a failed socialist command economy. This was not
surprising when the media were big beneficiaries of the restructuring through
deregulation of the sector.

Hallin critiques the PM by saying it presents a flat and static view of the media. It
focuses only on one function of the media, that is, reproduction of the dominant
conceptions of the political world but ignores the other functions the media performs
(Hallin D. C., 1994, p. 13). However, Barrett underscores PM’s continued relevance
He finds it valuable in helping foreground the collusion between the ruling elite’s
propaganda needs and mainstream media in the buildup to the Iraq war (Boyd-Barett,
2004). However, he argues its weakness lies in not being able to assign independent
weightage to each filter in the PM as they lack precision and tend to overlap (Boyd-
Barett, 2004). For example, it is hard to tell how profit motive of media owners and
advertising work independent of each other to influence news rather than being indistinguishably entangled.

This perspective was a distinct shift in the way the communications industry was perceived. It located control over the media in macro structures instead of the prevailing orthodoxy which claimed journalistic practice, sources and public opinion as the determining variables (Herman E. S., 1996). As they had predicted, the PM was met with hostility and then neglect for years (Sparks, 2007). However, there has been a revival in interest in the model in recent years although it still polarizes opinion and generates heated debates.

A critique by a sympathetic scholar states that the PM does not sufficiently take into account the pressures and constraints that influence journalistic practice and output even within advanced capitalist economies (Sparks, 2007). It certainly falls short in evolving capitalist democracies like India. One of the drawbacks is that this approach pays much less attention to the political than the economic as it is primarily a critique of capital. In the Indian context, political variables such as electoral competition, weak political parties, the role of political leaders, and fierce competition over state-controlled resources hold significant explanatory power (Kohli, 2001). It holds that the media are owned by a small, homogenous group of capitalists which applies to the US (Sparks, 2007). However, this is not applicable in the Indian context where the group of media owners are heterogenous and often own the media for non-economic reasons.

Forms of government and the political context are far more useful than patterns of ownership in analyzing news content and journalistic practice within which the media operate (Schudson, 2002). For example, the political economy approach does not help make sense of how a shift in balance of power between the state and market towards the latter influences journalistic practice and output as was the case in the liberalization of the Indian economy. With the state no longer occupying the predominant position in the polity, the dependence of the media on it reduces while its dependence on business increases. The result is that the media becomes less deferential to the state and its political actors and thus might give the misleading
appearance of being critical and independent in relation to certain sections of the polity. Political economy fails to fully tease out these shifting dynamics in a polity that has seen a dramatic transformation, starting as it does from a point of assumption of economic determinism.

Murdock and Golding maintain that while the instrumentalist approach is partially correct, it overlooks contradictions in the system. It is not as if owners, proprietors, advertisers and political elite can always do what they want. Murdock and Golding contend that capital can be a starting point but “it is not sufficient to assert that the capitalist base of the ‘culture industry’ necessarily results in cultural forms which are consonant with the dominant ideology” (Murdock & Golding, 1979, p. 18). Unlike the instrumentalists, Murdock and Golding assert that economic determinism needs to be thought of in a more flexible way, such that the dynamics of economics plays a salient role in defining the environment within which communication takes place but that does not discount other factors that influence communicative activity (Murdock & Golding, 1996, p. 15). Their approach takes into consideration the relations between the state and cultural industries, the practices of the people who produce the cultural products, the response of the consumers among other factors besides broad patterns of ownership of the cultural industries (Murdock & Golding, 1996, p. 14).

Although Curran concurs that the free market compromises rather than guarantees the editorial integrity of commercial media, in particular oversight of private corporate power, he critiques the political economy tradition contending that this account of the media does not give adequate weightage to countervailing influences within media organizations that make for relative journalistic independence. Murdock and Golding assert that the need for legitimacy and credibility, journalists’ professional self-conception and lastly, normative public support for journalistic independence are all important factors that mitigate the subordination of commercial media to the business and political interests of parent companies (Murdock & Golding, 1996). Political economy posits a devastating critique of neoliberalism which is very relevant to the analysis of the concerns in this thesis in the context of India’s neoliberal shift when the media and communications industry was
deregulated and privatized. The increasing hold of business interests, often inextricably tied up with political interests, impact the nature of journalism practiced and as the case studies in this thesis illustrate, determine what the media articulates and silences (Thomas, 2014). The evidence suggests the growing power of the market intertwined with political interests in India’s crony capitalist polity – manifest in media ownership and greater pursuit of profits – has resulted in instrumentalization of the press for business or political motives. Hallin and Mancini define media instrumentalization as the control of the media by outside actors – business, political or social groups – to uphold their interests (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Fears of instrumentalization of the press are not unfounded in a crony capitalist polity like India where business and state overlap often and thus, instrumental approaches to the media cannot be discarded. And yet, instrumentalization obscures the dynamic nature of structural influences and the role of agency in disrupting constraints on the media.

Schudson argues that the basic intuition that news broadly reinforces the view of the powerful elite, seems incontestable but determining its limits is what is of research interest. He describes the origins of interest in institutional or organizational analysis of the news to the 1960s when ‘instrumental’ perspectives from political economy did not seem to explain the critical and aggressive journalism in the US, particularly the coverage of the war in Vietnam. Thus, he contends that the ability of a capitalist class to manipulate opinion and create a closed system of discourse is limited (Schudson, 2010).

The reductionist versions of the political economy approach ignore several factors that influence news production in the journalistic universe. I would agree with Bourdieu when he observes that news is a refraction, not a reflection of the political economy for the large part. In other words, the shape, performance and role of the news media are broadly though not entirely influenced by the political economy. Here, there is much value in Gramscian insight that cultural institutions like the media are part of a process by which a world-view well matched with the existing power structure is reproduced through a decentralized process that is open to
contradiction and conflict but which is highly effective. I agree with the numerous scholars who have found the political economy perspective useful, especially in its non-reductionist forms, but insufficiently sensitive to the nature of myriad variables that influence news production. That is the reason I borrow from other theoretical perspectives that look to reconciling the structural approach with an internal reading of the journalistic field.

In the interdisciplinary work on journalism, the Anglo-American sociology of news perspective has largely looked at the social construction of news from within the social universe of the media. All the perspectives in this sociological inquiry of journalism were unified by an emphasis on “systematic actions, practices and interactions by which journalists maintained themselves as journalists” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 47) ignoring macrostructures. Reporter-source relations have been salient as a significant influence on the shaping of news, with most studies finding that government voices dominate and set the agenda (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). This approach finds factors that influence journalism within the social sphere of journalism ignoring the larger distribution and reproduction of power and wealth in society thereby missing out on the substantial external pressures exerted on journalism. The sum total of an individual’s actions does not add up to collective political and economic behavior. Thus, atomistic accounts provide a very partial account of social processes. These entirely elide power relations which are at the heart of social processes.

In fact, Herman and Chomsky themselves noted there is a need for “a macro, alongside a micro (story-by-story) view of media operations” so as “to see the pattern of manipulation and systemic bias” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). The PM elides audience and journalistic agency but that is because it emphasizes how pressures and control is inbuilt in the system and therefore journalists and editors do not need to be coerced (Klaehn, 2002). The PM presents an overview of patterns of media behavior as a result of institutional constraints. It gives us analytical tools to make sense of how “the media reflect the consensus of powerful elites of the state-corporate nexus” and “that the media will protect the interests of the powerful”
An initial reading of the evidence in this research demonstrates state-capital nexus and a resulting subordination of the media. The five filters enable analysis of the myriad pressures on journalism to conform to the interests of the ruling elite.

However, this does not make the theoretical framework “sufficiently sensitive to the nature of the pressures and constraints on news production arising from the economic and political realities” in contexts outside of advanced capitalist democracies too (Sparks, 2007, p. 68) and needs to be buttressed. What I need for my project of analyzing the underlying processes that impact news and journalism, however, is a theoretical framework that balances the macrostructures (i.e. the political economy) with the approach that focuses narrowly on news producers and their practices, as it is clear that the two are interconnected and interact in complex ways. Perhaps no other scholar has been able to reconcile the dichotomy between structures and agency as the French scholar Pierre Bourdieu. With regard to news, he conceptualized a mezzo-level “journalistic field” when he sought “a middle path between the excesses of methodological individualism – explaining social phenomena as a result of individual actors and those on the opposite end of the spectrum who explained phenomena by means of structures or social wholes alone” (Postill, 2010, p. 6). Bourdieu’s framework is invaluable in making sense of the complex and unpredictable ways in which macro structures interact with micro variables within and without the journalistic sphere.

Equally importantly, few other sociologists have given the kind of attention Bourdieu has to the symbolic dimensions of power (Couldry, 2007) and media with its ability to shape and circulate meaning in society constituting a central part of that. Power requires legitimacy if it is to be exercised successfully without resistance and revolt, socializing individuals to reproduce social hierarchies (Swartz, 1997, p. 6). The cultural industries, particularly the media, are pivotal in contributing to that project in modern times. The political economy perspective neglects the analysis of these symbolic forms legitimized and constituted by the media, by reproducing social hierarchies or challenging them. Marxists assign it the status of the
superstructure and therefore secondary to the economy (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu also connects practice – the material everyday action – to culture, structure and power and as such, draws relations between the tangible and intangible, reconciling theory with empiricism in a way few other theoretical approaches accomplish.

Thus, Bourdieu himself articulated field theory’s break with structuralism as a break “with the economism which leads one to reduce the social field, a multi-dimensional space, solely to the economic field, to the relations of economic production, which are thus constituted as coordinates of social position. Finally, there has to be a break with the objectivism which goes hand-in-hand with intellectualism and leads one to ignore the symbolic struggles of which the different fields are the site, where what is at stake is the very representation of the social world” (Bourdieu P., 1985, p. 723).

Unlike Marx, Bourdieu’s key insights include that there are immaterial forms of capital – cultural, symbolic and social – in addition to material forms though they can be converted from one to the other (Calhoun, 1993).

Despite the contradictions, I’d like to retain the political economy perspective as a broad base, a cornerstone, of the theoretical underpinnings of this project to explain the interrelationships between media, class and power which do become reducible to the ‘economism’ that Bourdieu talks about in developing democracies. The political economy of communication gives us a comprehensive overview of the nature of the media system, how it links to the economic and political system and how power is exercised (McChesney, 2008). I would argue that the differences between the two approaches are overstated with Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus possessing structural roots (Calhoun, 1993) and the central, unifying mission of both perspectives to expose the mechanisms and processes of class struggle and reproduction of inequality.

Thus, I build on this base with a synthesis of two mezzo level theories that claim to explain and analyze the interplay of structures and internal dynamics in the production of news content. My contention is that a synthesis of the theoretical framework presented by Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and new institutional theory provides additively more in creating a comprehensive paradigm for the sociology of
news for the purposes of my research, both of which build on rather than supplant existing approaches. Both theoretical approaches agree that a field or an institution is a social formation located within the macrocosm – and they possess and obey their own laws and thus it cannot be fully understood by looking at external influences or structures alone (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Both approaches build on but consider the political economy perspective inadequate to understanding the entirety of the dynamics of the media field. The core of field theory argues that cultural processes reproduce social structures and yet, can also be agents of social change. Similarly, journalistic fields “do not always reinforce the power status quo, but under certain conditions may actually transform power relations in other fields. And because power is conceptualized as itself divided, the mechanisms by which transformation as well as reproduction can occur are laid out more clearly” (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 10). New institutionalist theorists Timothy Cook and Bartholomew Sparrow, like Bourdieu, conceptualize the news media as a social formation that is somewhat autonomous from external pressures with some degree of internal similarity, which taken together has a significant amount of power vis-à-vis other social spheres (Benson, 2006). In fact, DiMaggio and Powell noted a “natural affinity” between American new institutionalism and Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 38). Thus, I argue that drawing them into dialogue provides a more comprehensive framework that can give a better account of the evidence sensitive to the myriad pressures and influences in the Indian context.

**Bourdieu’s Field Theory**

Beginning with field theory, Bourdieu attempted to theoretically overcome the oppositions that characterize social theory such as structure/agency, objective/subjective and to formulate a reflexive approach to social life. “His work is an attempt to transcend the seemingly binary choice between Levi-Strauss and Sartre and develop a theory of practice to overcome such dichotomies rather than claim a position among them” (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993, p. 4). He constructed a structure with three fundamental concepts – habitus, capital and field. In this, he assumes the existence of relatively autonomous organized social spheres of action
with each possessing its own capital that he envisages as a distinctive form of power (Rajagopal, 2001). Bourdieu’s notion of a habitus reflects his understanding of structure and agency. It is defined as “a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices…configurations of properties expressing the differences objectively inscribed in conditions of existence” (Bourdieu P., 1984, p. 170). It is here that Bourdieu stands most in opposition to structuralists. He challenges the structuralist elision of agents and of practices. At the same time, he qualifies this by arguing that there exists an enduring disposition in them that circumscribes the range of possibilities of their actions and practices (Calhoun, 1993).

For Bourdieu social life is to be treated as a mutually constituting interaction of structures, dispositions and actions. Habitus is historical because it changes overtime and it contains both structural and spontaneous elements. Bourdieu observes, “Habitus is a socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). Benson and Neveu explain how the conceptualization of habitus combats naïve assertions of structural determinism. As a result, understanding attitudes, behavior, actions, agency etc., must draw on an analysis of both the position in relation to structures and the historical trajectory traversed by an agent to reach that position (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 3).

Bourdieu believed that practice was constituted by structures but unlike Marx, practice was not only the reproduction of structures. Marxist approaches fail to take into account how people inhabit, negotiate or resist structures like law, government, cultural institutions (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Bourdieu insists that practice is always pregnant with a sense of agency but the possibilities of this agency need to be understood in their particular context (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). This bringing together of the subjective with the objective, undergirds field theory, and helps illuminate nuances and granularity of journalistic practice in a way that eludes structural approaches.

Thus, the concept of habitus allows me to explore the forms in which structural constraints can form ‘permanent dispositions’ in journalists while not depriving them of agency at the same time. For example, journalists have internalized the
government’s long held and enforced official line censoring coverage on the contentious issue of Kashmir in the Indian context. Thus, developing certain predispositions in journalists covering anything related to Kashmir. Also, symbolic positions within a field highlight different dispositions. For example, celebrity journalists particularly those on television, had greater access to the elite due to their high-profile. The greater access resulted in making journalists less critical of their interviewees as they developed a rapport over time and the fear of losing that access to the powerful diminished journalists’ criticality. Thus, prima facie, it would seem that the journalists who eschewed public visibility and kept a low profile like Vinod Mehta editor of Outlook magazine, were able to retain a greater degree of independence.

Bourdieu’s field theory develops from the work of Weber and Durkheim in associating the process of modernization with increasing differentiation between spheres of action such as that of politics, economics, religion, cultural production. Very simply, practice takes place in a relatively autonomous social space of structured conflict called a field (Swartz, 1997). Here, autonomous would refer to independence from the dictates of commercialism or simply put, money. In other words, possessing and obeying its own laws and rules instead of being dictated to by ‘profane’ commercialism (Benson & Neveu, 2005). For example, the scientific field would have a greater degree of autonomy as practice within this field requires a far higher degree of specialized knowledge than the field of journalism. Thus, the scientific field can be described as more autonomous than the journalistic field. However, the autonomy of this specialized social space is also circumscribed. Scientific research and organizations require funding and as such would at some level have to bow to the dictates of the sponsor or donor.

Interpreting field theory, Scott Lash says that the central axis of variation of the fields is the degree of autonomy (Lash, 1993, p. 198). Bourdieu finds the journalistic field possesses very little autonomy. No field is fully autonomous but the field of journalism, deeply intertwined with and strong pressures exerted by its adjoining fields, namely the economical and the political fields, make it particularly
heteronomous. However, even some degree of autonomy implies that it is not enough to know who owns the organization, who the advertisers are or if the government subsidizes it. Part of what the dynamics of journalism are can only be understood by making sense of what goes on within, the rules, the agents engaged in it and competition within the field among other factors. (Bourdieu P., 1993, p. 33). He states that what can be explained by the logic of the field varies according to the autonomy of the field. Thus, he explains the field of poetry or mathematics or science are highly autonomous, in other words, the more the autonomy the greater is the extent to which production in that field is for other producers and not for consumers in the social field (Lash, 1993, p. 198). “One of the general properties of fields is that there are struggles within fields to impose the dominant vision of the field, but these struggles are always based on the fact that they accept a certain number of presuppositions that are constitutive of the very functioning of the field” (Bourdieu P., 1993, p. 36). Thus, Bourdieu points out that the journalistic field endeavors to impose a legitimate vision of the social world as do the political and social science fields. “A field is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these position takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of force that is constitutive of the field…A field is a field of forces and a field of struggles in which the stake is the power to transform the field of forces. In other words, within a field, there is competition for legitimate appropriation of what is at stake in the struggle in the field” (Bourdieu P., 2005, p. 44)

The major fields in Bourdieu’s schema are economic and political fields and an amalgamation of the two is ‘the field of power’. Very simply put, a field is conceptualized as an organized social space constituted by unequal social agents who compete and cooperate with each other for whatever is at stake in that field. Bourdieu allows us to envision an internally differentiated terrain that can be understood by analyzing the forces that act on it externally and from within. The advantage of this conceptualization is that it is not burdened by normative expectations as is the case with the concept of public sphere (Postill, 2010). The field
needs to be thought of relationally with agents occupying different positions, competing and cooperating to accumulate valued resources within that field.

Bourdieu who has written in the context of commercialization of television in France which brought about dramatic changes in the field of cultural production overall, observes that the journalistic field has been exerting an increasing influence on other fields. He gives the example of “audience ratings” that affect the content of the news media heavily, particularly on the most heteronomous sector of the field – television – and that in turn spreads the dominance of commercialism to its “purest” regions or regions with the most amount of cultural capital. “Journalism is tending to strengthen the most heteronomous zone in each of the other fields – scientific, legal, philosophical etc. To put it briefly, in the philosophical field, it strengthens the “new philosophers”, the media philosophers (Bourdieu P., 2005, p. 41). In this regard, one of the fundamental ways in which the growing presence of television has transformed politics is making it far more personality centered in India with cacophonous talk shows replacing in-depth analysis programs.

While some of these empirical findings are obviously in the French context and may not be entirely valid for countries like India, the importance of Bourdieu’s project lies in the fact that his sociology provides theoretical tools for productive work that can be extended to and applied to other contexts. The key concepts of fields, capital and habitus can be employed to understand and analyze journalism very fruitfully in different contexts although they may need to be modified in the Indian context. For example, audience ratings and commercialism may not always exert the kind of pressures in the field of cultural production in India as they do in the US or France; there are often other motivations for actors to own and control media like political influence (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013).

It also provides a framework to analyze how different practitioners – journalists, editors, media owners – compete and cooperate for the same rewards such as power, recognition, money etc. And specific media practices will shed light on the concept of ‘doxa’ or those deeply internalized societal or field-specific premises that ‘go without saying’. Bourdieu defines doxa as “tacit presuppositions that we accept as
natives of a certain society” (Bourdieu P., 2005, p. 37). This takes into account the kinds of training journalists are given about what is the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to report, what is newsworthy or not, how to structure news reports thus deciding what to prioritize or downplay etc., all help in understanding censorial practices.

The third fundamental concept in Bourdieu’s theoretical project is that of “capital” which encompasses both the intangible, of symbolic value, and material things that are valued in that field (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Very simply put, for Bourdieu, it refers to things, both material and symbolic, that are sought after and rare in a system of exchange in a social space (Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990). Capital or a distinct kind of power possessed by fields that help distinguish one field from another and define them in the process: “A field is a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or ‘capital’” (Thompson, 1991, p. 14). “The capital they are able to accumulate defines their social trajectory (that is their life chances); moreover, it also serves to reproduce class distinctions…” (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993, pp. 4-5). Much of Bourdieu’s work focuses on the interactions between what he describes as social, cultural and economic capital.

He observes that the social world, as a whole, is structured around the opposition between two forms of power or capital – economic and cultural (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 4). The amount and form of economic and cultural capital varies within each field. In the journalistic field: economic capital may be taken as audience ratings, circulation, advertising revenue etc., while cultural capital may be seen in in-depth, long form articles, intelligent commentary and not page three. In other words, cultural capital encompasses specialized knowledge, educational credentials, technical expertise, artistic sensibilities among other qualities (Benson & Neveu, 2005). For example, The New Yorker magazine in the US positions itself as culturally rich providing insightful, well-researched and intellectual pieces of writing and opinions unlike a tabloid that does not require any specialized skill set.

Cultural capital stands in opposition to economic capital which refers to money or assets. Individuals and organizations strive to increase and valorize the capital they
possess in each field (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 4). Capital is an intangible form of power that takes dissimilar forms in different fields. In addition, each field possesses symbolic capital which derives its value by being seen as not economic (Rajagopal, 2001) but being a form of social esteem, prestige, authority and legitimacy. This is particularly relevant for analyzing the field of media which is perceived as rich in symbolic capital due to its power to define and construct reality. This explains why journalists often work for lower salaries than professionals in other sectors as symbolic capital of their field compensates for the lack of economic rewards.

In fact, one of the most distinctive features of Bourdieu’s work has been his insistence on not separating theoretical from empirical work. He has been sharply critical of “theoretical theorists” who construct abstract models without putting them to work with actual empirical analysis (Calhoun, 1993, p. 66). For his theory of practice, Bourdieu argued that a practical application of the theoretical framework should initially “analyze the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power” then “map out the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions” and then “analyze the habitus of the agents” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104-105). Thus, field theory provides a roadmap of the way empirical research can be carried out employing Bourdieu’s analytical and conceptual tools.

New Institutional Theory

As Schudson identified, there are two theoretical strands that the sociology of news draws on – first, symbolic interactionism or social constructionist views of society and the second, organizational or bureaucratic theory (Schudson, 1996, p. 149). The first perspective sees the creation of news as the social production of ‘reality’, while the latter takes it to be the social manufacture of an organizational product. Thus, the first perspective has focused research on aspects like reporter-source relationship or background of journalists or professional values journalists profess to abide by (Molotch & Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1978). Organizational theory on the other hand,
holds that it doesn’t matter what the personal beliefs or backgrounds, ideological affinities of individuals are, they are modified and shaped by the logic of the organizations they work for (Epstein, 1973). Thus, the origins of institutionalism lie in opposition to rational-choice behavior models. In essence, this approach proposes that institutions matter. They shape, mediate and limit human action through taken for granted assumptions or tacit rules that social actors imbibe through socialization, education or on the job learning (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Young journalists learn to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of unstated biases and pressures in editorial processes and newsmaking, particularly in a context like India, through the institution of journalism (Hanitzsch, et al., 2019). This has been theorized further by new institutional theory.

Institutional theory has had a long and influential role in sociological studies of organizations (Scott, 1981; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Institutions are defined as webs of rules and norms that shape social relationships and action (Nee, 1998). At its theoretical core is the choice-within-constraints framework of analysis that integrates economic and sociological approaches (Nee & Brinton, 1998). Thus, the focus is on institutions as systems of rules that constrain or enable individual action. New institutionalists argue that rules – both formal and informal – combine to structure action (Nee & Brinton, 1998). This paradigm attempts to explain how economic action is embedded in interpersonal relations and constrained by informal norms.

This approach emphasizes underlying rules or norms, tacit or overt, that bind and unify an institution or a closely-knit group. North who won a Nobel prize for his work on economic history employing institutionalism and its de-emphasis of rationality in decision making has made a seminal contribution to new institutionalism. “Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. They are made up of formal constraints (for example, rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (for example, norms of behavior, conventions, self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics” (North, 1998, p. 248). North makes a distinction between formal and informal norms. In this, he underlines the significance of informal norms in influencing the output. Formal rules
and norms can be changed suddenly however, the tacit, informal, shared knowledge and rules tend to persist in structuring action. This distinction is important to understand the gap between actual journalistic practice and ideals journalists profess to adhere to. These informal constraints or norms help analyze tacit, implicit shared rules of the game, distinct from formal rules or norms, that structure journalistic practice and contribute to illuminating censorial processes in the case studies under consideration.

Before I go on to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of new institutional theory in comparison to field theory, I will briefly give an account of the theory put to use to illuminate media as an institution predominantly by exponents like Bartholomew Sparrow and Timothy Cook. Applying this, Sparrow defines the “news media as an institution in the sense that the production of news by the media indeed, often their simple presence, provides a regular and persisting framework by which and within which other political actors operate…Individuals do what they consider appropriate and expected of them. What is ‘appropriate’ depends on the roles and behaviors within which persons are embedded. Individual preferences are matched to specific organizational and social conditions, then, rather than resulting from prior disposition or heredity” (Sparrow, 1999, p. 10).

Cook echoes this perspective, “Unlike traditional approaches in political science that studies formal mechanisms without seeing how these institutions work in practice, today’s institutionalism recognizes the central part of unquestioned forms, structures, and routines, as they interact with the everyday practice of these institutions. …Whereas much research on the purported bias of the news media ends up examining individual journalists and their individually held values and attitudes, an institutional approach stresses the roles that journalists and political actors occupy within their respective political and social systems” (Cook, 1998, pp. 14-15). In other words, it is not the individual news organization that is the unit of analysis but as a collective or the mezzo level of the ‘institution’ or inter-organizational ‘field’ that exerts semi-autonomous effects (Benson, 2004, p. 280). What the ‘institution’ thus includes is the routines and practices that define journalism—objectivity and
balance, the inverted pyramid style of writing etc. Therefore, much as field theory does, this approach “combines an attention to the news media as a society wide actor with a focus on the actual practices of news production used by journalists and news organizations” (Sparrow, 1999, p. 10).

The other aspect that new institutionalists posit is the production of homogeneity or despite the appearance of diversity, a broad similarity in the news routines and practices in the national context (Cook, 1998; Kaplan, 2002; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Sparrow, 1999). DiMaggio and Powell attempted to explain the rise of this similarity within organizations which they conceptualized as a process of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This concept explains a restrictive process that forces organizations to resemble each other when set in a certain environmental context. In other words, they adapt to and become compatible with their environment and in the process come to resemble each other. This construction of ‘startling’ homogeneity is particularly helpful in understanding how a competitive, diverse field of media organizations in the Indian context were so similar in their response to certain nationally significant stories in the case studies examined in this thesis. Meyer and Rowan argued that organizations come to reflect institutionalized rules that have been legitimated by the state (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, they increasingly do not take decisions on a rational basis but increasingly to conform to wider institutions. (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340). This directs our attention to similarity within the organizational field and the causes for it thus enabling a better understanding of an entire institution’s similar response to self-censorship.

Cook and Sparrow propose that news regimes are mediators of macro-level forces in the behavior of individual journalists and that is the reason for the “stickiness” of these institutions as they structure the behavior of journalists over time. An analysis of the institutional aspects of the news media leads Sparrow to conclude that the extent of uncertainty in news production (funding, access to sources etc.) is a critical factor in explaining journalistic practices and routines. Thus, organizations attempt to secure and stabilize their place within the wider institutional set up. Thus, the need to develop routines and conventions of news gathering and setting up of beats and
beat reporters to combat uncertainty in their environment (Sparrow, 1999, pp. 13-14). Thus, without the uncertainty, there would be no need for these routines and conventions. These taken-for granted, shared, often unstated but widely understood practices and assumptions are constitutive of and explain, in some measure, self-censorship in newsrooms, thus critical to analyze in my research.

Sparrow argues that news routines work by constraining journalists. He contends that reporters make strategic calculations about what would get them ahead which involves getting along with the people you work with, which in essence implies reproducing the status quo (Sparrow, 1999). This echoes an insight Breen enunciated in his classic Social Control of the Newsroom in 1955. This view bears many similarities to Bourdieu’s field theory, which posits that the “field” of journalism is largely defined by the interaction of economic pressures and a status competition between journalists.

This helps explain strong homogeneity in news which then makes the news media a particularly strong political institution which rather than being monolithic, functions as an interest group system. This phenomenon is observed most often in new and poorly established democracies besides the countries that can be described as part of the polarized pluralist or Mediterranean model of professional journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). These are also the systems which feature high correspondence between political partisanship and journalists’ refusal to adhere to the basic tenets of the liberal model of journalism. Mancini posits that instrumentalization often happens in a discursive vacuum marked by the lack of public debate and discussion (Mancini, 2012). This was observed in the 2014 election campaign of the authoritarian Hindu right leader Narendra Modi. The media, instrumentalized by overlapping business and political interests, acted as a homogenous political actor playing a distinctly partisan role.

These news routines and practices, stated and tacit, overlap with the development of professional culture which constitutes one of the criteria that Hallin and Mancini employ in their model and explains variations between media systems. Hallin and Mancini posit that the level of development of journalistic professionalism is one of
the crucial dimensions that explains variations between different media models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). I would argue that this is also one of the factors linked to the degree of prevalence of or resistance to censorship in a society. Journalistic professionalism, in fact, is a factor that stands in the way of media instrumentalization by social, political or economic agents seeking to usurp the decision-making process in the field (Mancini, 2012).

A Synthesis

Here I will put forward the reasons why I think I need to enhance the theoretical domain set out by Bourdieu’s field theory in my analysis of journalistic field and influences that impact its performance by supplementing it with new institutional theory. Perhaps the biggest drawback is that Bourdieu’s model of ‘cultural economy’ largely considers the effects of commercialization on the news media and its effects on other fields in turn, ignoring the pressures exerted by the state. In fact, “law and politics, conventionally seen as coercive force, is seen by Bourdieu as symbolic power, in some ways ignoring its materiality” (Lash, 1993, p. 200). Journalists even in the US have tried to retain their autonomy from both market pressures as well as the state (Schudson, 1993). In trying to explain enduring cross-national comparisons such as Benson’s comparison of the French and American press, he underscores the elision of political and economic constraints in Bourdieu’s framework. He argues that “the compression of two analytically distinct forms of power provides no leverage to explain the different ways that US and French state bureaucracies or elected bodies wield power over the news media, often in direct or indirect conflict with market logic” (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 14). For example, many of the enduring differences between the French and American press can be attributed to the role the state has played in subsidizing and supporting certain media to protect diversity in ideological viewpoints in the French media.

The conflation of the two fields is particularly problematic in the Indian context where the state plays a significant role either on its own or in collusion with business in exerting pressures on the journalistic field. The comparative Worlds of Journalism Study categorizes India as a country where journalists perceive political
influence on their work to be very high, second only to the highest category which includes countries like China (Hanitzsch T., Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019). Here, new institutional theory has the advantage of treating the two strains in the ‘political economy’ as analytically distinct. In fact, new institutionalism insists on a more autonomous role for political institutions (March & Olsen, 1983) and providing a framework for analyzing the ways in which news organizations act as political actors (Schudson, 2002). “Political democracy depends not only on economic and social conditions but also on the design of political institutions. The bureaucratic agency, the legislative committee, and the appellate court are arenas for contending social forces” (March & Olsen, 1983, p. 738). This is true of the Indian democratic structure where different organizations within the political structure are arenas for competing social forces, and different arms of the government work to provide checks and balances to the running of the government. Government and business are far from always in agreement and thus they can be analyzed separately in their influence on the institution of the media (Cook, 1998).

On the other hand, field theory argues that they need to be seen together as the heteronomous pole (political and economic), examining the complex interplay of these pressures precisely because they are not independent but act in relation to one another. Both Sparrow and Bourdieu argue that news routines primarily mediate economic forces, and this has a rather direct application in understanding the relationship between advertising revenues and censorial pressures. Scholars like Cook, Kaplan and Ryfe argue that the state exerts greater pressure on news routines and practices (Ryfe, 2006). In the Indian context, this debate is highly relevant as it will help untangle the influence of the state and commercial interests. They have largely overlapped but the balance of power has shifted between them to privilege business in recent years, however, the two do diverge occasionally under certain circumstances. As a result, the nature of influence they have exerted on journalism has changed and transformed. These differences and shifts cannot be teased out unless politics is seen as a variable independent of economics.
The deletion of the political from the political economy was restored by Hallin and Mancini in their path breaking Comparing Media Systems when they observed, “…that the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 1-2). The political context including dimensions such as the relatively weak development of rational-legal authority can have significant explanatory power in the Indian media context. As Hallin and Mancini explicate, contexts where rational-legal authority is strongly developed tend to have lower clientelism and instrumentalization of the media and therefore a more developed professionalism amongst journalists (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 57-58). In the Indian political context, political clientelism can help explain the media’s evolution and the resultant instrumentalization which combines with inherited Western notions of balance and accuracy. Thus, an understanding of the nature of the state, its policies, media law, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society, among other elements of social structure in the Indian context will be crucial to analyzing the field of journalism and news production (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 8). Benson laments a dearth of literature on the role state plays in shaping news content (Benson, 2004, p. 281). New institutional theory helps overcome this weakness in Bourdieu’s framework, that of the elision of the pressures exerted by the state or the political field in the manufacture, enhancement or inhibition of censorial processes.

Both theoretical perspectives also complement each other in explaining the apparent paradox of competition and homogeneity in the news media output. Bourdieu observes that to exist in a field is to mark one’s difference thus his theory focuses on the production of difference and competition thus explaining scoops, competition to break news etc. Journalists and news organizations compete for status, distinction and economic rewards. New institutional theory on the other hand, explains how organizational routines produce homogeneity, thus, despite the appearance of diversity, the media often produce similar views and positions. Field theory attends to variation within the field while new institutionalism directs our attention to similarity within it. As was witnessed in the Nira Radia case (2009-2010), most
Indian media houses took a similar position of not publishing details that exposed the collusion of journalists with the elite thus censoring an issue that should have been in the public domain. Eventually though, it was competition between the media organizations combined with the availability of the information on the internet that led to disrupting that censorship (case discussed in greater detail in the methodology section).

New institutional theory, however, subordinates individuals to the logic of the organization thus leaving little agency with the individual agents or journalists negating empirical evidence of how journalists’ subjective beliefs influence news decisions. This is a drawback that field theory compensates for, through the concept of habitus, believing in the transformative potential of individuals. Institutional theory’s origins lie in opposition to behaviourism and therefore would eclipse the very real contribution made by journalistic agency. Bourdieu uses the laws of the natural sciences to explain how the agent with the most amount of energy can distort the field of forces. This could be directly applied to the phenomena of paid news in India, a practice that has institutionalized the practice of advertorials or decimating boundaries between advertising and news. This has skewed the entire field with most news organizations following the lead to increase their bottom line in the Indian context. While new institutional theory is good at explaining how macrostructures exert pressures and mediate practices within the field, they lack an explanation of how changes within the field may lead to structural changes in society or account for social change. Thus, new institutional theory’s ‘critical junctures’ explains fundamental change within a field as a result of ‘external’ shocks to the field (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999). These may be elections resulting in a change in the political regime among others as has happened with the rise of right-wing assertive nationalist BJP. Benson gives the example of the gradual hyper commercialization of the media in the US resulting in the breakdown of the wall between editorial and the business side of operations. In the theoretical model set out by Bourdieu, scholars have argued that his field theory is better at explaining reproduction of social inequality rather than explaining social change (Lash, 1993). Unless change is the sum of individual agency, there is little explanation for fundamental changes in society.
The other advantage that new institutionalism offers is the tool to be able to distinguish between the formal rules and informal norms that inform journalistic practice which gives us greater purchase on analyzing censorship. Bourdieu’s notion of doxa is conceptualized as the tacit, taken for granted rules that constitute the practice in a field. However, in the case of journalism in the Indian context, practice differs substantially from professed ideals. Thus, most journalists would profess to adhere to the democratic ideals of a watchdog role. However, this does not explain self-censorship by journalists and a widely shared unspoken understanding of certain subjects being taboo and constitutive of the journalistic practice that resides on the ground. These implicit, shared, internal understandings structure news output contradicting journalistic doxa of holding the powerful to account. There is persistent tension between formal and informal norms which combines in complex, unpredictable ways. Thus, new institutionalism provides a way of explaining this struggle and its surprising results, supplementing our understanding of the institution of journalism.

Most importantly, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework conceptualizes media as an institution placed within a wider social formation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) Thus, providing a comprehensive theory of power and society as a whole (Hesmondalgh, 2006, p. 216). Field theory helps incorporate the journalistic field, with its forces and relationships, within “progressively larger systems of power” (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 11), thus, giving a systematic and coherent picture of power relations both within and between fields. New institutional theory does not pay sufficient attention to the interrelationships between power structures and journalism particularly when political economists have demonstrated that the news media serves as an agent of dominant power reproducing social hierarchies. Neglect of issues of conflict and power given the salience of the field of power – constituted by overlapping parts of economic and political fields – in impacting and shaping news impoverishes the theoretical framework. Bourdieu’s tradition of work in the cultural and more specifically media field strongly critiqued the wider social and political consequences of the media system (Benson, 1998). Thus, it fleshes out the interrelationships between fields much more sharply with the concept of ‘symbolic
power’ of the media or what Bourdieu described as “power of constructing [social] reality” (Bourdieu P., 1991, p. 166). This concept can be employed in understanding the symbolic power, traditional legacy, media retains in setting the agenda and consecrating issues vis-à-vis the emerging technology enabled social media. It is also helpful in understanding how the media field, though not rich in economic capital plays an important mediatory role between the economic and political fields in India.

So far, I hope to have demonstrated the need to employ a synthesis of both Bourdieu’s field theory and the new institutional theory in the analysis of the Indian journalistic field. Additionally, I argue for the retention of the non-reductionist version of the political economic approach as well. Even though Bourdieu’s model explicitly rejects structural determinism, I argue that a critical political economy perspective is indispensable in any study of forms of censorship particularly in a country that is witnessing increasing political and corporate ownership of the media. Murdock and Golding underline the importance of the contribution of this approach to analyze how and in what ways the relations between the media and the state have consequences for the range of expression and ideas in the public sphere (Murdock & Golding, 1996, p. 22). The analysis of the role of the state’s power both as regulator of communications institutions and also as a communicator itself have to be taken into account. In the not so well-established democracies like India, political and economic pressures can be so significant that they result in media capture or instrumentalization in certain conditions. The current climate of fear and intolerance point to conditions like these for the media.

Additionally, David Hesmondalgh asserts that Bourdieu’s body of work had little to say about large scale, commercial cultural production and the domination of cultural production across all cultural industries by multinational corporates (Hesmondalgh, 2006, p. 220). Much of his analyses focused on art, publishing or restricted production fields rather than the mass mediated and consumed cultural goods, due to which Bourdieu has been labeled an elitist (Lash, 1993, p. 208). He also underscores the overstatement of the polarization between autonomy and heteronomy in a field. “Large scale production might be more differentiated than Bourdieu’s work suggests,
and the relations of heteronomy and autonomy might sometimes be more fluid and complex than he implies” (Hesmondalgh, 2006, p. 221). While Bourdieu’s polemic on journalism and television describes the threat posed by journalism and television in particular on the autonomy of other fields, it is largely concerned with ‘quality’ press rather than the ‘popular’ press which, in turn influences the more autonomous prestigious institutions as well (Hesmondalgh, 2006, p. 218).

These are the areas where, I would argue, the political economy approach combined with organizational studies will be more useful than field theory. As a result, I hope to have shown that I need to draw on a wide theoretical domain in my study of the interrelationships between power and journalism.

The research questions that follow from deploying a wide-ranging analytical perspective provided by a theoretical domain that includes political economy, field theory and new institutional theory are:

1. How does the state and market shape the field of journalism in the Indian context?

1a. How has the neoliberal shift in the polity transformed the role of the journalistic field in the democratization processes and heteronomous pressures exerted on it?

1b. In what ways and under what circumstances does the political structure provide countervailing influence on journalistic institutions?

2. How and in what ways do the internal processes within the field of journalism enable and constrain journalistic autonomy?

2a. What role do the participatory internet enabled media play in democratic consolidation?
Chapter 4

Research Methodology

I adopt the qualitative research method of case study research where cases are defined as an instance of “class of events” which refers to a phenomenon of scientific interest such as hybrid democracies or kinds of economic systems (George & Bennett, 2004, p. 18). The choice of the case study is pivotal to grasping the deepest understanding of the critical phenomena (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). Yin argues that it is perhaps the most suitable strategy when attempting to understand ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions of a contemporary phenomenon with little in the researcher’s control (Yin, 2003). Yin describes doing case study research as doing an empirical examination of a phenomenon within its natural context employing several sources of evidence (Yin, 2013).

The research gap my thesis identifies is analysis of those junctures where the national journalistic field was faced with the task of scrutinizing the ruling elite. Each of the case studies selected has a common thread running through them – the journalistic field censored itself on issues of significant national importance silencing democratic discourse instead of enabling it. Each of the case studies selected in this research enables me to analyze and deconstruct the processes within the journalistic universe through the narratives of the actors involved and the interactions between structures and institutions that impact journalism. In a crony capitalist state, there is a deficit in scholarship of the interrelationships between the news media and the ruling elite particularly since the state’s greater embrace of capital.

The Indian media landscape is bewilderingly complex and variegated with significant ruptures and tensions along language and regional lines (Rajagopal, 2001). Scholars have rightly argued against treating it as a singular monolithic field as it combines significant diversity and variation (Rajagopal, 2001; Udupa, 2015). However, the cross-cutting strains of economic and political pressures result in isomorphism manifest in the wide-ranging self-censorship by the national mainstream press in these case studies. Yet, the disjunctures between the macro
factors like the political and economic spheres and dislocations within journalism combine in complex and unpredictable ways resulting in the unraveling of media’s self-imposed silence. As I seek to illuminate patterns and processes in journalistic practice at the intersection of the economic and political interests in the Indian context, I needed to select case studies that would allow an analysis of the similarities and differences in journalistic practice in certain contexts. The case study method is valuable as it allows “breaking apart the institutional presence of journalism” to dissect and analyze “a picture of journalism that is both internally and externally divisive and contradictory” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 113).

**Case Study Research**

This research concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and conveys the experience of actors and stakeholders (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Hancock and Algozzine define case study research as intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). A case study is a well-defined aspect of a historical event rather than the event itself (George & Bennett, 2004). Advantages of case study research are that it is contextual and allows for rich description because it is grounded in multiple sources of information. It is more illustrative than comparative or predictive (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). “Case study research methods allow researchers to capture multiple realities that are not easily quantifiable. This approach differs from those of other methods in its holistic approach to information collection in natural settings and its use of purposive sampling techniques” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 447). It allows for the deconstruction of various phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Stake argues that the strength of a case study is extending understanding of phenomena by making visible tacit knowledge, that is, of how things are, why they are, how people feel about them. This leads to generalizations that guide action. This brings forth statements that are rich with the sense of human encounter (Stake, 1995).

The case studies selected for research in this thesis are briefly outlined below:
1. The news media and its coverage of and relationship with selected members of the political elite like the Gandhi family and the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This story gives me an opportunity to examine the intersection of politics and business and its influence in shaping news content; the relationship of the political as separate from economics on the news media; and the ways in which journalism itself within a certain context socializes individuals into upholding certain beliefs and norms. It shed light on RQ1: What are the concrete material processes by which the political field, either on its own or in collusion with the business elite, influences journalistic practice and output? And what are the ways in which self-censorship is disrupted?

2. Media’s silence on the corporate lobbyist Nira Radia that revealed the collusion between government ministers, top politicians, businessmen and journalists or a select oligarchy that subverts democracy to benefit a few. However, the blackout of the story developed fissures after a few days as it got coverage in the foreign press and the recorded conversations were freely available on the internet along with social media taking on the mainstream press, criticizing its censorship. Limits were imposed on censorship by voices on the internet that undermined traditional media’s control over national discourse underscoring its democratizing potential. This case study helps answer RQ1a, RQ2 and 2a: How has the neoliberal shift in the polity transformed these heteronomous pressures on the journalistic field? How and in what ways do the internal processes within the field of journalism enable and constrain journalistic autonomy? What role do the participatory internet enabled media play in democratic consolidation?

3. Analysis of the heteronomous pressures exerted by India’s biggest conglomerate Reliance on the news media particularly its silence on the one of the country’s largest corruption scandals described as the gas pricing scam. The media threw a veil of invisibility on the news story that developed over a period of 5-6 years gives me the opportunity to examine the discursive processes of media’s self-censorship and its disruption in a democratic structure. It enables analysis of the ways in which economic structures and political institutions place limits on the freedom of the press
in and how their influence crosscuts and interlocks as well as the disruptions that come into play. This illuminates RQ1 and 1b. This enables understanding how the market and state combine to shape journalism and what are the conditions under which the press’ subordination gets mitigated. Additionally, in what ways and under what circumstances does the political structure provide countervailing influence on journalistic institutions?

The predominant reasons this method is suited to my research is allows for descriptions that are complex, holistic, involving myriad variables; data at least partly gathered from “rich personalistic observation and a narrative style of writing that allows for verbatim quotation from social actors within the setting about tacit knowledge” (Stake, 1978, p. 7). The case study method allowed for sharpening, clarifying and redefining the research questions as the investigation unfolded.

**In-depth Interviews**

In a case study, the researcher is often at a distance from the context under examination and is studying the phenomenon by collecting multiple artifacts or kinds of data. These data can include interviews, focus groups, printed materials, media, and other sources of data. There is a range of data-generation methods in qualitative research such as observational methods, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, focus groups. This researcher chose in-depth interviews as research required gathering data that journalists would not be comfortable sharing with others in a focus group and would not become visible in observational methods. It needed a research method where the interviewee or journalist was secure in the knowledge that the information being shared would not be attributed to them given the sensitive nature of the information being revealed relating to the rich and powerful. These interviews required developing a rapport and assuring the interviewees of the confidentiality of information divulged.

Interviews can further be categorized as unstructured, semi-structured and structured. While structured interviews are usually employed for quantitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), I will discuss semi-structured and unstructured interviews
further. Unstructured interviews are most commonly used in the ethnographic tradition of anthropology to elicit the meaning of observed behaviors and interactions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This category of interviews is normally used along with the observational data gathered whereas semi-structured interviews can and are often used as the single source of data for research (Adams, et al., 2002). The initial few questions were relatively uniform and focused for a relatively homogenous group of interviewees to share their experiences. The questions then evolved and modified with each interviewee depending on their answers, their candor, role and position within the newsroom hierarchy. Rapport and trust played a critical role in getting interviews with journalists and eliciting information of a highly sensitive nature involving powerful interests (Spradley, 1979).

Thus, the methodological practices that were best suited to my research project are: in-depth interviews with journalists who were involved in the coverage of these three case studies. I adopted the research method of in-depth interviews with journalists to understand the social construction of news through the perspective of those who construct the message. I also supplement my empirical data with the analysis of the text/visuals or the message, as such, production of the discourse where needed. This would imply supplying additional information on themes, frames used, relative emphasis devoted to certain topics and other dimensions. In addition, I analyzed documentary evidence such as interviews with or articles by or social media presence of (tweets) of journalists related to censorial practices in news production.

The research is based on face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 40 political and business journalists in Delhi (the national capital) and Mumbai (financial capital). The author, a former journalist, began by interviewing former colleagues. A non-probabilistic, purposive sample was used to contact reporters on who had been directly involved in the coverage of the three news stories under consideration in this dissertation, as they unfolded. The interviewees were reached and contacted using the snowball sampling method. Purposive sampling of interview subjects was considered most suitable since the aim of the project was to reach and interview journalists who had reported the news stories that are analyzed here. These
interviews were semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists and editors which often lasted 3-4 hours.

The central questions revolved around the processes of information gathering in the story concerned, interventions by and interactions with editors, media owners and the people who were being reported on, overt and covert pressures, tacit understandings that informed the discursive process of covering the stories and issues in an attempt to generate richly textured experiences and reflections about their experiences. The approach to the interviews was conversational and open-ended in order to be able to record their reflections and not just a recounting of the events. There were times when the interviewees had to be prodded to be more specific in their responses and give greater details and examples.

A majority of the journalists were interviewed between April, 2014 and December, 2015, represented organizations central to the field of English language journalism. The researcher recorded interviews using an audiotape and note taking in the cases where journalists were not comfortable with their voices being recorded. Most of the interviewees were senior journalists and editors with an average industry experience of 10 years, predominantly employed by leading national mainstream English language media such as The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Hindu, The Indian Express, The Economic Times, DNA, Outlook Magazine, Open Magazine, New Delhi Television (NDTV), CNN IBN,CNBC TV18, and TV Today. Six of the journalists were drawn from Hindi and other regional language media like NDTV India, Aaj Tak, Amar Ujala, and PTC. Many of the interviewees had worked for both print and television media. Names of most journalists interviewed have been anonymized as requested as they feared reprisals given the sensitive nature of information revealed about powerful people involved.

These are elite organizations in the English language national press and therefore far from exhaustive in a country where the media is significantly heterogenous, divided along linguistic and regional lines. There are significant cleavages between national and subnational media, television, and newspapers that led Rajagopal to allude to a ‘split public’ (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 151). In other words, the difference in the public
that consumes news media in different languages is not merely divided along linguistic lines but reifies very different public spheres. There has been a gulf between the English-language and regional media historically with the English language media being accused of being elitist and leading the trend of commercialization in the Indian press and reaping much greater profits. The vernacular press, on the other hand, has led the move towards greater localization. However, evidence indicates that the staggering growth of Indian language media is now challenging the dominance and reach of English language media (Jeffrey, 1993; Neyazi, 2014).

In spite of these ruptures and cleavages, I would argue that these divisions may be overstated, particularly when examining the news media’s relationship with the ruling elite. The trend of commercialization and regionalization drives both the English and vernacular language media in their pursuit of profits since liberalization. Thus, there may be greater similarity than is often assumed. In addition, coercive political and economic pressures cross cut all news media (Rao, 2010). This is underscored by Chadha and Koliska’s study of regional television channels which are also riven by corrosive interpenetration of political and business interests. This results in censorial pressures constraining journalists and highly insecure working conditions for them (Chadha & Koliska, 2016).

An example of these overarching economic and political pressures would be the press’ coverage of right-wing political leader Narendra Modi. While the English language media questioned Modi’s role in the 2002 communal massacre in the Indian state of Gujarat, the 2014 elections were remarkable for the ‘erasure’ of Modi’s association with violent Hinduism, indicating that the news media capitulated irrespective of the language division (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015, p. 318).

The face-to-face, in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews often lasted 2–3 hours. The interviews have been anonymized, as most subjects feared reprisals from bosses and political leaders in case any comments were attributed to them. The findings include the general themes discussed in these semi-structured interviews
and reproduce extracts from these conversations, which provide valuable insights into the relationship between the journalistic field and the ruling elite.

Data analysis involved what is referred to as the ‘editing approach’ as the researcher constantly reviewed and identified text segments from the transcripts leading to the formulation of interpretative statements and identifying patterns (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The other approach used in conjunction is the ‘immersion/crystallization’ approach where the investigator repeatedly immerses himself/herself into the data gathered till interpretations and patterns become visible intuitively (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

**Qualitative Research**

Thus, qualitative research underpins the case study research method adopted in this project. This type of research is often pitted in opposition to quantitative research. James Carey, considered the founder of the tradition of critical cultural theory in the US observed that communication has had two contrasting definitions in the history of Western thought (Carey, 1975). These two perspectives were based on a transmission view of communication and the other was the ritual perspective of communication. The former conceptualizes communication in terms of transportation – sending, transmitting, distributing information – with an implicit idea of control. This view relies on technological advances in sending messages over great distances and distributing information of knowledge. The latter perspective is rooted in the idea of community and a common culture where people share beliefs, views, exchange of ideas and experiences. The two differ in their underpinnings – transmission is based on sending or disseminating while the latter is interested in participation and sharing in the maintenance of society.

Gaye Tuchman starts a discussion on research methods by observing that the most valuable research on news from the earliest to the most recent American and European studies has been qualitative (Tuchman, 1991). Whether it was Gans’ 1979 study of the coverage of the Cuban Missile crisis, the civil rights movement in the U.S. by Epstein in 1973, the Vietnam war by Gitlin in 1980 or the war in Northern
Ireland studied by Schleisinger in 1978, all of them largely relied on participant-observation studies of news organizations. She says this is not surprising as the most interesting questions about news and news organizations concern processes such as the relationship between news and ideology (Tuchman, 1991). As my research explores and investigates significant influences that shape journalism in neoliberal India, I would concur with Tuchman that qualitative research would yield the richest empirical data for my purposes. The key points in qualitative research are that it is interpretive and naturalistic, in other words, attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Quantitative research is best suited in causal models employing dependent and independent variables. Qualitative research stresses how social experience is created and given meaning. It enables an understanding of the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of social processes. In contrast, quantitative research emphasizes the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). It seeks to answer the question ‘how many’. This does not make quantitative methods faulty modes of inquiry but the nature of study, situated and reflexive, renders them insufficient for the purpose (Deetz, 2000; Schwandt, 1989). Qualitative research is often distinguished by the fact that hypotheses are usually deduced from the data gathered rather than stated in the beginning of the study (Ritchie, et al., 2013).

As the purpose of my thesis was examining and analyzing what, how and why certain factors influence journalism in the Indian polity and the process of news production, I found qualitative methodology the most appropriate for my research. It involves primarily in-depth interviews with actors within the journalistic field supplemented by discourse analysis where needed of three case studies of news coverage. Its interpretive and naturalistic nature allows me to explore which points of view are able to enter the public sphere, which actors and institutions are able to shape the process of debate, and how these processes are affected by the structural characteristics of media systems, essential to any understanding and analysis of censorship production (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 304). Aspects of qualitative
inquiry like its relational style of fieldwork, its inductive mode of analysis, and its resistance to closure make it better suited to addressing some questions about culture, power and interpretation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As I investigate the political, economic, sociological, technological factors that shape journalism, it becomes clear that these factors interlock and crosscut in complex ways such that they resist falling into linear, causal models thereby making quantitative research less useful in illuminating the phenomena. It attempts to tease out and untangle the myriad variables that influence journalistic practice and output however, these relationships change in different circumstances. Thus, they are contingent to a set of circumstances which cannot be expressed in quantitative research. The nature of the political economy and the nature of the journalistic sphere require an in-depth investigation which quantitative research doesn’t lend itself to. The data presents seemingly contradictory factors and ambiguities which quantitative methods cannot account for.

**Limitations**

Unlike quantitative research, it will be hard to generate “hard evidence” through qualitative methodology that can be validated and replicated as many parts of this process may be tacit or implicit or covert and vary from case to case, event to event. It is an attempt to construct the phenomenon based on the viewpoints and experiences of the actors who were involved and the personal role of the researcher in choosing interviewees and designing the questions, will have in built biases and could lead to the charge of the data being anecdotal. Overall, a drawback maybe that these interpretations are not falsifiable and cannot be extended to wider populations unlike quantitative data. A content analysis or quantitative methods would need to be employed to be able to build a correspondence between journalists’ observations and the actual output by journalists would enable greater degree of certainty in the findings. Also, most interviewees belong to elite news organization in the center of the national journalistic field in India and therefore the data gathered is not entirely representative of the diverse, variegated media landscape. Given the breadth of the
country’s media, much more field work needs to be done nationally and regionally to arrive at any comprehensive analysis.
Chapter 5

The Nira Radia Tapes - News Media’s ‘Crisis of Conscience’

This chapter attempts to illuminate the interrelationships between journalism and the ruling elite – a narrow, dominant coalition of political and economic interests that have steered the state since economic restructuring. It also explores the transformation in role the media plays in democratization processes and the nature of heteronomous pressures on it as a consequence of economic reforms in 1991.

The case study chosen examines the Indian news media’s coverage of the recorded conversations of an influential lobbyist, Nira Radia, which were leaked in 2010. When these recordings, that exposed the collusion between the political and business elite of the country in circumventing democratic practices, first became public, the response of the traditional mainstream news media was to black out the story (Muralidharan, 2010). This attempt at censoring what is often termed the largest corporate media scandal in the history of the country ultimately proved unsuccessful. The silence eventually unraveled due to a complex interaction of factors like professional ideals, a vibrant civil society and the democratizing potential of social media. Many journalists have written that, as a result of this scandal, which revealed the extent of the nexus between journalists and the ruling elite, the Indian media faced a crisis of credibility (Bidwai, 2010; Saeed, 2015; Ninan, 2010). These conversations reveal the news media not just as a “stenographer to power” but also an “active and eager participant in the abuse of power” (Muralidharan, 2010, p. 10), highlighting its “anti-democratic” nature (McChesney & Scott, 2004).

Anatomy of Self-Censorship

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, elected a second time in 2009, was hit by a swarm of corruption scandals. The biggest among these was the 2G spectrum scam (Bhattacharya, 2017). This related to the allocation of telecommunication licenses at disproportionately low prices, leading to a loss of nearly 40 billion US dollars to the Indian government, in a scandal the Time
magazine described as second to Watergate in its “top ten abuses of power” (Tharoor, 2011).

Unknown to the public, the investigation of this scam included surreptitious wiretapping of a high-profile corporate lobbyist, Nira Radia, by the tax authorities of the central government in 2008-2009, in their effort to trace tax evasion and money laundering (Saeed, 2015). Radia represented major business interests including two of India’s largest conglomerates, Reliance Industries and Tata. These recorded conversations, eventually leaked, made it evident that her job was to lobby for A. Raja, a politician well-disposed to the business interests of her clients, and ensure he gets the telecommunication portfolio (Bisht, 2010). Her clients like Tata and Reliance had a significant interest in the telecom sector. Most of these recorded conversations relate to the hectic goings on at the time of cabinet formation in 2009 when it was unclear who would be given this important portfolio (Bisht, 2010).

The recorded conversations between Radia and several members of the ruling elite had been leaked to many media houses by an unknown source and were available in the public domain circulating through the internet for weeks, as many editors and journalists have testified in interviews with this researcher. And yet, the mainstream press chose to throw a cloak of silence on this story. They chose to deliberately blackout the story despite the intense public interest as is evident from social media (Chadha & Koliska, 2016). Instead of triggering follow-up stories, investigations and debate, it was met by a “strategic silence by the Indian media” with the exception of a few journalists (Joseph, 2010).

It was not hard to fathom why the media feared reproducing the transcripts given the long list of powerful interlocutors in them. The tapes illuminate the brazen and entrenched nexus between elite politicians and capitalists in looting the resources of the state (Chadha, 2012). Indian polity rests on a narrow alliance of the economic and political elite and the transcripts were evidence of the proximity between the state and private capital (Kohli, 2007). Stripped of the thin façade, they revealed how not just natural resources and infrastructure had been given over to corporations but policy-making itself (Pandita, 2010).
Since economic restructuring in 1991, the country had grown at a rapid pace with the power of business groups growing dramatically (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). The Nira Radia tapes reveal the mechanisms through which business increased and exercised its power in the polity. One of the most cited from the extensive conversations is that of the country’s richest businessman, Mukesh Ambani, asserting that the Congress party, leading the government at the time, was his personal property! This was borne out a few years later when another corruption scandal unraveled exposing how the Congress led government had enabled Ambani’s Reliance Industries to plunder gas unchecked from the country’s gas reserves (Nayar, Mukherjee, & Tata, 2013).

The conversations also foregrounded the active role journalists played in this collusion. The tapes revealed journalists “offering the lobbyist’s clients scripted interviews, giving advice on how to place stories in media outlets, talking about writing columns relying on positions articulated by Radia, and even apparently conveying messages on behalf of political interests close to the lobbyist” (Chadha & Koliska, 2016, p. 199). Radia is heard boasting how she got stories adverse to her clients’ interests suppressed and instead their views were reproduced prominently as news stories.

Amidst this loud silence of the mainstream press, two small national news magazines Open and Outlook uploaded and published the recorded conversations on November 18, 2010. They show collusion among government ministers, leading politicians, business leaders and journalists as they reveal how a “select oligarchy” manipulates the existing system at will, to benefit a few (Bisht, 2010). It was no overstatement when newsmagazine Outlook began its cover story, ‘India, the republic, is now on sale’, a reflection of the enormity of the crisis (Outlook, 2010).

The editor of Outlook, a well-regarded, influential news magazine, Vinod Mehta, said he published the conversations because there was a clear and compelling case they were in the public interest. Though they appeared on the same weekend (November 18, 2010), for the editors of Open magazine the decision was not straightforward. Hartosh Bal, the political editor of Open magazine, a start up at the
time, admitted they deliberated over the decision of whether or not to publish, for a month. Manu Joseph (2011), editor, observed that they knew publishing this story would breach “a sacred code of Indian journalism” not to turn the spotlight inwards and expose their own. His deputy Bal also divulged they did not observe the fundamental journalistic rule of contacting the people, clearly powerful, on the tapes for their version of the story before publishing the transcripts. He later described the secretive decision-making process in the newsroom.

“We decided to go ahead with the story, didn’t tell anyone except for one or two reporters, released the story at the last minute. Even the publisher didn’t know what the story was, leave alone the owner. There was no question in our minds. You work by instinct. You take a call. If any of these people had been contacted this story would never have seen the light of day. Why do you think no one had published them for over a month? Others had these tapes probably 6-8 months before we got them. Even when we did a follow up a week after we broke the story, we called up two people for comments, Barkha and one more person. The next hour a call had come from our owner that the story was not to go. Don’t run the story. The other people involved were Tatas, Ahmed Patel etc., this was just a Barkha. (Hartosh Bal, personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Journalistic doxa of holding the powerful to account enables journalists to develop strategies of resistance. Journalists had to bypass received notions like objectivity and impartiality in order to sabotage the self-censorship imposed by the mainstream news media. The very weapons journalists in the Western context adopted as organizational and institutional firewall (Zelizer, 2004), like impartiality and balanced reporting, were employed to uphold and defend self-censorship in the Indian context. Tuchman has analyzed how objectivity was developed as a strategic ritual by journalists to protect themselves from the accusations of partisanship (Tuchman, 1972). She outlines how objectivity is shown to have been practiced through form, content and inter-organizational relationships in her seminal sociological work (Tuchman, 1972). One of the ways journalists observe objectivity is by taking the views of both the stakeholders in the story to argue they have been
balanced and fair to all sides. However, this usually alerts the people whose interests it harms and they then exert pressure to scuttle the news stories. Pressure from various sources include threat of legal action to prevent publication or broadcast as soon as those shown in a negative light get wind of the story. Notably, the handful of journalists who defied the suppression of the story felt they had to ignore these journalistic norms altogether, to do the kind of journalism that serves public interest.

As a fledgling publication that was a year old, struggling to make its mark in a competitive market, the editors of *Open* were aware of the risks they were taking in carrying this story. While the risks were high, the gains were high too. It earned them the wrath of powerful people but it also immediately helped get recognition and establish them as a name to reckon with. Conformity was so much the norm that journalistic scrutiny of the powerful was considered rebellion. After a while, *Open* came to be known as a “rogue journalistic enterprise” for its “rebelliousness” (Journalist, personal communication, August 5, 2014).

Interestingly, both the magazines that defied the orthodoxy of steering clear of the Nira Radia tapes are owned by corporate houses, *Outlook* by the Raheja Group largely involved in real estate and construction while *Open* magazine is owned by one of the country’s biggest conglomerates, the RPG-Sanjeev Goenka Group. Corporate ownership of these two publications, in the political economy framework, should have ensured they too treated this story as taboo. However, both the weekly newsmagazines had extraordinarily intrepid journalists in leadership positions. *Outlook* had forged a reputation of critical scrutiny of the powerful due to its celebrated editor Vinod Mehta. Mehta had demonstrated his acumen in being able to run independent publications that were also commercially viable. He had in his own words found success in being able to make news popular without making it simplistic as was the case with *Outlook*.

Describing the editorial process in the Nira Radia tapes story, he confessed he hesitated publishing the tapes were leaked due to corporate rivalry. The commercial implications of taking on such influential actors for his small publication also weighed on him (Mehta, 2013). Finally, Mehta (2013) said he couldn’t think of a
story he had come across in his decades-long career that had more compelling public interest than the Radia scandal when he heard the conversations.

Mehta and *Outlook* had been punished for their scrutiny of the government in 2001. This had taken the form of tax raids on the homes of the corporate owners, the Rahejas, in retaliation for two cover stories done by *Outlook* that exposed the influence a few business houses wielded over the Prime Minister. This had angered the then Prime Minister and his closest aides. Retribution came in the form of months of harassment of the owners over their financial dealings (Pillai, 2017). Subsequently, Mehta was forced to apologize to the Prime Minister and plead with his aides to put an end to the harassment the magazine’s owners were put through. He had had to ask his journalists to steer clear of critical stories of the government at the time. Unlike earlier experiences with several of his corporate employers who would have succumbed to the political pressure and fired him, the Rahejas kept Mehta on as editor. Despite this experience, he still went ahead and published the Radia story, compelled by the import of the story to Indian democracy. Thus, corporate ownership does not always explain journalistic submissiveness as political economy proposes.

*Open*’s deputy editor, Hartosh Bal, is another journalist who had built a reputation for speaking truth to power which had cost him his job several times. He asserts that unregulated corporate ownership is one of the myriad factors for this degree of subordination of the news media in India. “Journalistic cowardice” is also to blame with journalists censoring themselves without even trying to test the boundaries (Hartosh Bal, personal communication, May 7, 2015). “Failure to push back is also answerable for the fate we find ourselves in. We succumb too easily. Apprehending that action will be taken journalists start falling in line long before the point where lines need to be drawn. They are also guessing, anticipating what the owners want and they start delivering to that which means that owners command a huge amount of influence” (Bal, personal communication, May 7, 2015). Upright journalists often do not stand up to pressures exerted by owners.
Environmental uncertainty, according to new institutionalists, can lead to “startling homogeneity” as it did in this case with most organizations responding by silencing democratic discourse (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Environmental conditions in this context include a weakly developed rational-legal authority resulting in fear of retribution through defamation cases; feeble regulatory framework and precarious labor conditions which makes it easy to get rid of editors who may refuse to toe the line; and overriding commercial pressures. Thus, the new institutionalists’ theoretical approach that news regimens evolve to mediate and counter uncertainty helps explain the sustained silence.

Bal explains that most editorships are in fact given to those whose submissiveness can be counted on.

“The owner selects the editor. Owner selects editor knowing he/she is Modi’s or Sonia’s man or industrialists’ man. Selects knowing the kind of corruption he indulges in. Jaitley (finance minister in the Modi government) is not calling the owner because the owner has already provided him an editor who will do his bidding. It suits them to place corrupt editors. An honest editor does not suit the owner, is damaging to his larger business interests” (Bal, personal communication, May 7, 2015). Outlook editor Vinod Mehta’s unwillingness to bend to political pressures had cost the Raheja Group heavily.

This time, while Mehta pondered over the potential implications of publishing the story, he heard the newly launched Open magazine might steal their thunder by beating them to it. As a fledgling publication, Open was amongst the last to receive the audio recordings. With a young team of journalists, they decided to go ahead although they were aware of the considerable risks involved. They had a strong incentive: to make a mark in a hypercompetitive market. The fear of competition from Open magazine forced Outlook to shed its hesitation and publish the story on the same weekend as Open.

Bourdieu’s conception of the internal dislocations within the field shed light on how the entry of new actors plays a critical role in preventing a closing of the journalistic field. New agents, in this case Open magazine, struggle for recognition by
establishing its difference as a transformative force. Established and celebrity journalists draw their capital from and align themselves with the economic and political elite while it is the new players in the field (Open magazine, DNA) who seek to disrupt this hegemonic control that mainstream media claims for itself in providing access to the public sphere to build their cultural capital. Meanwhile, the news magazine Outlook that had established its reputation for criticality and editorial independence feared losing its accumulated cultural capital in the struggle for dominance in the field. Their positions in the field and the amount of cultural and economic capital was a determinant of whether they acquiesced or defied the self-imposed silence.

Field theory, thus, aids analysis of the heterogeneity in the field of journalism. It would seem that position in the field and competition for distinction converged with the opportunity to be able to exercise authority to contribute to constituting journalistic resistance. Without the opportunity to be able to push the publication of stories through, resistance would have remained an intention. Thus, structure structures agency. These internal dynamics, elided in the political economy and institutional theory framework, are unable to explain how the news media’s silence on the issue eventually unraveled. This case foregrounds the salience of agency as individual journalists, at great personal risk, defied the prevailing unspoken orthodoxy. This case study demonstrates that the subversive actions of a few had a significant impact. Given the tenuous and conflicted relationship between democracy and journalism in this context, it is evident that normative benchmarks contribute to shaping and informing journalistic practice albeit irregularly. Many of the Western educated, upper caste and class English language journalists and editors are informed by and trained in the Western ideals of journalism. And yet, only a handful had the courage to defy the conformity. Bourdieu underestimates the impact of individual agency in his theoretical architecture.

Vinod Mehta, in his autobiography, describes his reaction on hearing the conversations.
“Listening to the tapes is an education for a student of Indian democracy…..her (Nira’s) nonchalant tone while discussing matters exclusively in the domain of the Prime Minister and his cabinet provide us a glimpse of how important she had become. The Radia tapes, as some commentators have noted, show how laughably easy it is to subvert our supposedly robust democracy” (Mehta, 2013, p. 65).

Besides the politicians and capitalists caught on the tapes, there are 30 journalists and editors from India’s most reputed television news channels and newspapers who are seen to be lobbying or influence peddling in these conversations (Chadha & Koliska, 2016). Barkha Dutt, Vir Sanghvi and Prabhu Chawla are among the most well-known journalists in the national media. Journalists like NDTV Group Editor Barkha Dutt were heard acting as power brokers in this process. As one of the best-known faces on Indian television post liberalization, Dutt was a target of considerable criticism although she denied any wrongdoing saying she did no more than “humor a source who was providing me information during a rapidly changing news story” (Dutt, 2010). The organization she worked for, NDTV, came out in vehement support of their celebrity journalist.

“In the pursuit of news and information, journalists talk to an array of people from all professional backgrounds; this case being an unfolding political story on cabinet formation, after the general elections. To caricature the professional sourcing of information as "lobbying" is not just baseless, but preposterous” (NDTV, 2010). Several journalists endorsed this view including one of the most celebrated television journalists in English language news Rajdeep Sardesai asserting that the, “conversation between source and jounro is legitimate. If quid pro quo is shown, expose it. Else, don’t destroy hard earned reputations” (Jebaraj, 2010). Chadha and Koliska argue that “reducing the offensiveness of the action” was one of the strategies undertaken by news organizations to repair the damage done and uphold the institutional myth about journalism and its ideals of serving public interest (Chadha & Koliska, 2016, p. 206).

However, the evidence against journalists like the national daily the Hindustan Times’ Advisory Editorial Director Vir Sanghvi was less defensible. This
conversation was taking place in the context of an acrimonious public feud between the two Ambani brothers, the owners of India’s biggest conglomerate, where they were battling over control of the country’s natural resources like oil fields in the highest court of India. The following are excerpts from the conversations between Nira Radia and Vir Sanghvi where the latter offers to do a "fully scripted" interview with Radia's client and India's richest man Mukesh Ambani in his weekly column for the newspaper and on his television show.

“What kind of story do you want? Because this will go as Counterpoint, so it will be like most-most read, but it can’t seem too slanted, yet it is an ideal opportunity to get all the points across. It has to be fully scripted. I have to come in and do a run through with him [Mukesh Ambani] before… We have to rehearse it before the cameras come in” (Sanghvi, 2010).

Sanghvi’s column in the Hindustan Times that was published the day after this conversation, faithfully reproduced Radia’s views, advocating the interests of Mukesh Ambani (Jebaraj, 2010). One of the most respected senior television journalists in a Hindi language news channel, Prabhu Chawla is heard offering advice to Radia on Mukesh Ambani’s legal wrangle. “You should convey to Mukesh that the way he is going about the Supreme Court is not the right way (Jebaraj, 2010). He later defended his actions calling it “social chit chat” (Jebaraj, 2010). Whether individual journalists, and there are many on the tapes, can be held to be guilty or not, there is no doubt that these conversations showed a compromised fourth estate.

The conversations illuminated the machinations of the ruling elite and how they exercised power and yet, the national mainstream media that retains enormous power in news making and news framing (Rao & Mudgal, 2015), chose to ignore the story pretending it had not happened (Muralidharan, 2010). Instead of triggering follow-up stories and further investigation, it was met by a “strategic silence by the Indian media” with the exception of a few (Joseph, 2010). Media critic and founder of the media watchdog website, The Hoot, called this the “great media blackout” describing the way most major media outlets kept a lid on the story although the tapes with the conversations were available with most of them (Ninan, 2010). The mainstream
press continued to turn a blind eye to the story for nearly two weeks even after *Open* and *Outlook* news magazines broke the story on their front pages, generating a great deal of public interest.

That the silence was deliberate, not due to lack of access to the conversations, becomes apparent in the interviews this researcher conducted with journalists and editors at various media houses who were involved in the coverage of the Nira Radia story. A senior journalist who works for one of the biggest national newspapers (who did not want to be named) recalled that their publication had the tapes in their possession for more than a month before *Open* and *Outlook* magazines published them. He described the deliberations that took place in the newsroom.

“They (*Outlook* and *Open*) didn’t have as much time as we did. We had the tapes for more than a month, they had to do in a hurry. I roped in XYZ hoping to increase the chances of its publication because he is part of the establishment much more than I am, but it didn’t work. It was sent to the owners, normally they don’t come into the picture so when I say it is just as well others did it, I have 2-3 reasons for it. My focus was on journalists but without their names as they were very wary of that. You could make out who these journalists we were referring to are as they are famous. We had referred to Barkha Dutt and Vir Sanghvi but we compromised by not publishing their names. All this was much before it was published in *Open* and *Outlook*. This was when it was in the works. ABC who is an editor here was also figuring in those tapes. I didn’t bring all this out in my report. On a soft subject like journalists itself they were dithering so much. This was also a rare instance of owners coming in. They told me now Managing Director is looking at it. Otherwise they don’t bother.

Question: Why wary of reporting on the media?

Answer: They are all complicit in the fourth estate turning completely into access journalism. The more vulgarized form is tabloidization where everything is judged by TRPs (viewership) and popular interest so you are going to fall prey to that. This is going to be disrupting all that, raise questions about journalism as it is being practiced, going to throw everything out of gear. They could sit on it for that long as
no one had it at that time. They were not too keen on it as they were being shown in a poor light, behaving as the guilty party when I made them hear XXX’s conversation. *Hamam mein sab nange hain* [All are the same inside]. There was uneasiness. They didn’t want follow up, what the implications would be. There was a reference to a dress by NiraRadia in a conversation with Tata. The owners used the excuse that that is a private conversation. That was so disingenuous as there was far more important stuff but we got into that debate”.

Suppression of the story, successful for nearly two weeks, would give truth to Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) insight that the commercial news media works to “manufacture consent” on behalf of the elite. However, it is evident that one of the macro influences on journalism emanates from the political field, largely elided in the political economy approach. This news story represented a convergence of the interests of the economic and political elite and it would seem the journalistic field, weakly autonomous as it is, yielded to the heteronomous pressures this story represented. Here, the Bourdieusian insight that economic and political pressures combine in ways that it is hard to examine their influence separately would seem to hold, particularly in a crony capitalist state.

This would suggest that confronted by an intersection of interests of the powerful elite, the boundaries of the field or institution of journalism lose clarity, with the journalistic field becoming entirely subordinate to the field of power. Empirical evidence shows how editorial processes were subject to various degrees of accommodation of powerful interests, largely to pre-empt coercive, exogenous pressures like withdrawal of advertising and defamation cases, from the field of power. Historically, Indian journalism has been subject to significant external pressures notably those of ownership, the threat of withdrawal of advertisements and political partisanship such that these constraints have been internalized. These factors are so persistent and insidious that, over time, journalists come to accept the limitations that they impose upon their daily practices as constitutive of the field of journalism.
However, the dangers of eliding the state become evident when we try and unpack the factors that led to the disruption of the news media’s silence. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India, a state institution meant to oversee the functioning of various government ministries, published a report with a harsh indictment of the telecommunication minister and the government’s role in the 2G spectrum scam (PTI, 2010). The CAG put the loss caused by this scam to the government at a staggering 40 billion US dollars, a number so astonishing that it was given saturation coverage by the media. This contributed to a surge in public interest in lobbyist Nira Radia and her machinations. Eventually, public interest on social media compelled mainstream press to break its silence and the national news media had to reflect public anger against systemic corruption and crony capitalism, making it a big political story. Thus, new institutionalists’ insistence on retaining the state in the analysis of journalism holds weight in the Indian context.

This was also a time when several corruption scandals were coming to light and there was an overriding wave of public sentiment against corruption. “Whether it is in tune with popular mood or institutional pressures they don’t want to be at odds with either and that’s why the foremost job of a journalist according to them is to create an ambience for advertising” (Journalist, personal communication, December 9, 2014). This underscores the virtuous cycle of news media and neoliberalism reinforcing each other (Mazzarella, 2003; Rao, 2010; Udupa, 2015).

Besides the powerful interests they would antagonize, Manu Joseph (2011), editor of Open magazine observed they knew publishing the Radia story would breach “a sacred code of Indian journalism” not to turn the spotlight inwards (Joseph, 2010). Another political journalist alludes to this implicit understanding that the media will not scrutinize their own working. “There was the omerta kind of understanding that the media will not touch each other. It was part of acculturation as a journalist” (Journalist, personal communication, December 7, 2014). This further sedimented the news media’s quiescence on the issue.

Here, new institutionalism adds greater depth to understanding the extent of conformity and homogeneity in the journalistic field. New institutional theorists
Cook and Sparrow encourage us to see news regimes as mediators of macro-level forces on the behavior of individual journalists. Ownership of the media has largely been controlled by a few families, funding of the media has often been channeled through opaque ownership structures (Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010; Saeed, 2015; Thomas, 2010). Media economy is characterized by an interplay of formal and informal capital as well as speculative capital and players with dubious motives (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013). This has become even more pronounced since the liberalization of the economy and media industry. Thus, it would not be in the interests of capitalists related to media houses to have journalists direct the search light inwards and ask uncomfortable questions. Over time, this imposed constraint of the news media being a taboo subject for journalists has been internalized by journalists.

While “the brand leaders abdicated their role as watchdogs” among the newspapers (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015), it was one of the newly founded newspapers DNA, published from Mumbai, the financial capital rather than Delhi, the political capital that chose to report on the issue. However, it too adopted a very cautious approach publishing an opinion piece rather than a news report. “What is really scary is that, despite living in a ‘democracy’ that boasts of a ’free press’, if you were dependent only on TV and the big newspapers for the biggest news developments of the day, you would never have known about the Nira Radia tapes, and the murky role of media persons as political power brokers” (Sampath, 2010). In an interview, the columnist who wrote this piece explained how he thought he was able to write so critically of the media at a time when most others chose to tread carefully around this issue, “I think it helped that DNA was a Mumbai based newspaper rather than Delhi. Delhi as the national and political capital has a closed, rather incestuous, hierarchical journalistic scene where I think the pressure not to criticize these powerful editors and senior figures is much greater because everyone has something to hide” (Journalist, personal communication, March 23, 2015).

He alludes to what has come to be described as ‘access journalism’ whereby journalists feel constrained in being critical as that would cost them access to an
important source of information or news which could mean losing out to competition. An investigative journalist asserts that the space for watchdog journalism is shrinking as “increasingly what is fashionable is access journalism. Prannoy called it quid pro quo journalism where you get very close to the people you cover. You are on first name with them, go to parties with them. That’s the kind of journalism that wittingly or unwittingly people feel very comfortable with because it would seem as you are in the thick of things, giving a reader a sense of what’s happening in the government, a policy decision that’s going to be announced a day later if you come up with it a day earlier what’s the big deal with that, what is important is to come up with what is flawed with it, the ulterior motive behind it but that they don’t get into as you become too close… Questioning is going out of our DNA. So if I have an idea which requires us to stick our necks out, criticize authority I don’t even bother to suggest it. This is how self-censorship works” (Journalist, personal communication, 2015).

This view was echoed by the executive editor of a newsmagazine.

“Journalists and editors become too close to power in Delhi. You can’t have editors and journalists half the time schmoozing politicians, bureaucrats, serving in consultancies, setting up think tanks with government ministers. It is just too incestuous. If you meet them at parties every night and call them by their first name then what are the chances you will take them on?” (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

In fact, many achieve their elite status because of their insider sources and access to the right circles rather than a critical distance from them. The nature of this proximity and nexus may have transformed over the decades but it is not new. “Ours is a crony economy. You can’t do business in an honest fashion. Business has always been vulnerable to pressure from the government. It just requires one call from the right person to make you fall in line. I am not claiming that journalism has got worse or that there was a golden era. Journalism was a chummy profession that saw themselves as nation builders. Journalists, politicians and bureaucrats hung out
together because they say their objective being one that of national building, making it grow etc.” (Journalist, September 17, 2015).

The silence on the issue seemed particularly deafening from the usually rambunctious, often shrill, television news channels. The only exception was CNN IBN, one of the top three English language news channels, but that too treated the issue with great care. On November 22, four days after the conversations were published in the two magazines, one of the channel’s news anchors did a debate-based program that alluded to the issue of corporates and their influence on the state without taking any names or playing the transcripts. Later she explained her reluctance to take names in her discussion, “I didn’t want to target a fellow journalist but we felt that we shouldn’t focus on the individuals but what’s happening to the profession. It felt too much like a witch hunt of celebrity journalists” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015).

Once the two news magazines Outlook and Open published their cover stories, the interest in the Radia scandal and criticism of the mainstream press’ silence on the story had surged. Many media houses were forced to defend their self-censorship on the grounds that they could not ascertain the authenticity of the conversations (Ranganathan S., 2010). In fact, they accused those publications that carried the original story of ‘unethical’ behaviour and ‘maligning’ fellow journalists (Ranganathan S., 2010).

Thus, inability to verify the source and authenticity of the evidence was employed as ‘boundary work’ to exclude this story from journalistic content (Carlson, 2015, p. 19). However, this justification was perceived as an excuse as most caught on the tapes themselves did not dispute the genuineness.

As the buzz on social media like Facebook and Twitter about the story and its blackout became louder, the silence in the mainstream traditional media became deafening. Pre-Twitter, the issue may have met a silent and quick death. But in the Twitter era, that changed. The more silence pervaded the Indian mainstream media, the louder the chatter on Twitter became. Any mention in print or online resulted in
furious tweeting. Both #Barkhagate and then #mediamafia became trending topics (Agarwal, 2015).

Making a play on her flagship weekend show titled We, The People, Twitter allowed netizens to express their outrage at the media’s participation in corruption and its cover up. Perhaps it was Barkha Dutt’s fame and aggressive, sensationalist style of reporting from the frontlines that made her the focal point of much of the ire against the press as evident from the following tweets. It also stems from the gendered nature of debates online.

#Why not let We, The People decide, instead of you deciding for us all?

#Play the tapes on your show, na, Ms Dutt, instead of tweeting about them?

Twitter allowed netizens to express their outrage at the media’s participation in corruption and its cover up. Civil society actors on social media delighted in exposing the gaps between journalists' public rhetoric and private reality (McNair, 2009).

International publications like The Wall Street Journal, Huffington Post and Washington Post were quick to give coverage to the scandal unlike the domestic press. Many noted that it was the internet that had kept the issue alive despite attempts by the mainstream traditional media to bury the issue. “Our news media blanked it out, but the Internet forced the issue” (Dasgupta, 2010). Interestingly, Barkha Dutt and Vir Sanghvi mounted a fierce defense of their actions on Twitter all through the time this controversy unfolded (Dasgupta, 2010). Recent studies on Twitter in India have demonstrated its potential to create a sustained conversation between journalists and civil society that keeps the issue alive in the fast-changing news landscape (Thomas & Rajagopalan, 2015).

Di Maggio and Powell observed the coercive pressure of “cultural expectations within which organizations function” (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150) and how they counteract the normative expectation developed by the field to “define the conditions and methods of their work” (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983, p. 152). Ursula Rao’s anthropological study of journalistic practices in India found that close
relations with the powerful are a *sine non qua* for professional success and yet, journalists performed what she describes as “performances of distance” to escape accusations of proximity to the powerful (Rao U. , 2010, p. 117). The evidence collected through interviews as well as text analysis by this researcher indicates that in a clientelized media system journalists build their cultural capital through proximity to the powerful. The Nira Radia tapes exposed the familiarity, closeness, quid pro quo and negotiations between journalists and political leaders or business. This was used to get “exclusive interviews, which are often given more prominence than news reports” (Journalist, personal communication, May 9, 2015) or often played out in the form of mock combative rather than genuinely adversarial interviews.

Over a longer term, deepening democratization has led to an expansion of civil society and the democratic public sphere transforming the political field (Rao & Mudgal, 2015). Liberalization has fashioned a rising urban middle class conditioned by mediated neoliberal precepts of “consumer modernity and responsibilized citizens” (Udupa, 2015, p. 203) constitutive of a growing civil society. These civil society actors mobilized social media to articulate their anger against deep-rooted corruption and crony capitalism. Popular sentiment, reflected on social media was combative and implacable, questioning the news media’s legitimacy, forcing mainstream press to relinquish its subservience (Chadha, 2012).

If the interest on social media was any indication, there was considerable urban audience/reader interest in the issue. A ratings or viewership obsessed mainstream media chose to suppress the story, ignoring the overwhelming public interest. As McNair argues, the contention that market pressures will always degrade political journalism is arguable. In this case, market pressure in terms of getting the largest possible audience and requirements imposed by democratic norms posed no contradiction (McNair, 2009). However, this public interest did not suit the demands (financial and ideological) of the individual capitalists that own the majority of media organizations.
As the upheaval in social media refused to abate, legacy media increasingly found it difficult to withstand the weight of the pressure. Finally, the country’s highest circulated English language daily newspaper *The Times of India* broke its silence, reporting the issue online and *CNN IBN* broadcast an extensive discussion playing the transcripts, followed by other news channels.

This was seen as a triumph of the power of emerging technologies over traditional media with netizens posting self-congratulatory messages on social media (Dasgupta, 2010). Unlike the past where the traditional and non-traditional media had shown synergy in coverage of issues, this issueunderscored the tensions between the two. In instances like the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, both the media had reinforced each other with Twitter breaking news while traditional media delineated the bigger picture. This could be described as a “crisis of conscience” moment for the Indian news media (Herbert, 1996, p. 166). The loss of credibility and legitimacy was eventually exploited by authoritarian leader Narendra Modi who stared describing them as ‘bikau’ [sold out] media using this loss of legitimacy to bypass mainstream media and its scrutiny. Mainstream media was seen as an ‘elite institution’ (Rao U., 2010, p. 26), the traditional media gatekeepers controlling access to the public sphere while new media represented voices that sought to disrupt this hegemony symbolizing increasing “professional-participatory tension” (Carlson, 2015, p. 19). Limits were imposed on censorship by voices on the internet that undermined traditional media’s control over public discourse underscoring its democratizing potential. With the fourth estate relinquishing its watchdog role, it would be tempting to see this as the formation of the fifth estate that enabled networked citizens to demand accountability (Dutton, 2009).

However, an experienced political editor tempers this optimism.

“Mention of the tapes without the actual tapes was already floating around in social media online for a long time but it needed the credibility of serious journalists working in print who had gone through the tapes for it to be taken seriously. Online readership is 2-3 lakhs [200,000-300,000] which isn’t much but the fact that these
things were published in print multiplied their credibility to the extent that the social media was able to magnify it” (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

Thus, online media needed the legitimation and the resources of the traditional media to be effective. The cumulative pressure compelled the mainstream press to relinquish its subservience.

Eventually, there were other far reaching consequences of this controversy. As *Open* magazine editor Manu Joseph had feared, retribution followed. The Tata group withdrew all advertising from both *Open* and *Outlook* magazines leading to a substantial loss in a revenue model that depends largely on advertising rather than subscriptions (Ojha, 2011). Ratan Tata filed a case against *Outlook* in November, 2010 alleging that the publication of tapes violated his right to privacy, involving the magazine in costly litigation (Mehta, 2014). Though it may not have been a direct consequence of this, both Manu Joseph and his political editor Hartosh Bal were asked to leave the magazine in 2013 while Vinod Mehta was eased out as editor and moved to a ceremonial position in *Outlook* in early 2012.

It is important to examine the institutional context in which this scandal took place. As Schudson (2014) argues the role of journalism in a democracy cannot be understood outside the evolving institutional architecture of democracy. Journalists caught on tape cozying up to the influential lobbyist were one of the very public targets of the simmering public anger against crony capitalism and unprecedented levels of corruption in government. Progressive legislation such as the Right to Information Act and new entrants in the political sphere like the Aam Aadmi Party [Common Man Party] had been relentlessly exposing the murky links between big business and state that has underpinned economic growth since liberalization. Such was the public outrage as scandal after scandal tumbled out that it mobilized public protests in the country’s capital, Delhi, in what burgeoned into an anti-corruption movement. Public anger was also fueled by a slowing economic growth rate and surging inflation which became dominant electoral issues in the subsequent 2014 national election. As a result, 2010 came to be described as the year of scams.
Even as mainstream media abdicated its monitory role, the role was taken over by a robust public sphere and civil society that contributed to imposing limits on the media’s acquiescence to structural constraints suggesting that society has high democratic hopes of journalists (Schudson, 1983) and steps in to put pressure on the journalistic field and if needed, participate in it enabled by new communication technologies. In a non-Western democratic context, the media and the rest of the institutional architecture seem to be locked in a dynamic dance as roles played by and demands placed on different institutions shift constantly.

This case study demonstrates the distance between actual practice and professed doxa aside, more pernicious is perhaps journalists employing practices such as the ‘performances of distance’ (Rao U., 2010, p. 91) or ‘ceremonial conformity’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340) to maintain a façade of adhering to the normative dimension of public service to obscure their instrumentalization. The cynical use of democratic ideals to legitimate their power and obscure its true role. Far from being a defender of public interest or even a source of information to enable informed public participation in a democracy as the dominant paradigm outlines, the institution of journalism in collusion with the dominant structures was a saboteur of democratic practices. For too long, celebration of the commitment of the world’s largest democracy to a free and independent press has obscured the frequent and regular incursions of the political and economic fields in the field of journalism and its subordination to the powerful elite.

Overall, this case study has disquieting implications for the press’ role in Indian democracy. It is deeply embedded in the neoliberal project playing a salient role in augmenting extant structures of power.
Chapter 6

The Political Elite and Journalism’s Power Parallelism

This chapter seeks to examine the relationship between the news media and the political elite in India, one of the aspects of the interrelationship between news and power. This case study outlines political reporting of the Gandhi family when the Congress party led by them was in power followed by a major shift in political reporting in the run up to the 2014 national elections which culminated in an overwhelming victory for the right-wing authoritarian leader Narendra Modi. Between 2012 and 2015 the long-standing deference of the Indian press towards the Gandhi dynasty broke down, and scandals that had previously been kept from public knowledge were extensively covered in the media. In its immediate aftermath, a new culture of deference was built up around the incoming Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, whose Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) defeated a centrist coalition led by the Gandhi family in a general election in 2014 resulting in concerns that Modi was elected with the help of a neoliberal media (Rao & Mudgal, 2015, p. 618). This shift in the relationship between the media and members of the political elite illuminates important factors about the structural position of the media in Indian society and the culture of journalism that it encourages.

The national elections in 2014 that swept the controversial leader Narendra Modi to power have generated a great deal of scholarship on their transformative impact on the Indian polity (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Sardesai, 2014; Jaffrelot, et al., 2019). This article argues that, in fact, the elections demonstrate a continuity in the media’s relationship with dominant members of the political elite. While the nature and source of political authority changed in 2014, the favorable reporting of dominant figures or families has a long history in India since the journalistic field reorients its subservience towards the new power structure.

We examine the similarities and differences in how authoritative and populist leaders like the Gandhis and Modi manipulate media power. While scholars have noted a close correspondence between politics and media in India (Thomas, 2014), there is
little analysis on the architecture of the media’s subservience, otherwise seen as free, in the world’s largest democracy. Once the rise of the Modi regime looked imminent, a new orthodoxy began to be constructed with strong elements of continuity. The news media’s subordination to dominant political figures transformed into genuflection, as evidenced in the run up to the 2014 election. Modi’s pro-market image led to an unprecedented interlocking of political and economic interests, a convergence that has intensified since India’s neoliberal shift (Chandrasekhar, 2014). However, the compulsions of populist politics in an electoral democracy impose limits on this heteronomous relationship (Nayyar, 2001; Thomas, 2014). The relationship between the news media and individuals of the political elite, thus, can be conceptualized as that of contingent heteronomy.

The mechanisms by which deference to the Gandhi family was sustained are outlined and the reasons for its collapse examined. The emergence of the new orthodoxy, and the challenges it faces, are then detailed.

**The Gandhi Family and the Media**

The Gandhi family long enjoyed a unique place in Indian society and politics. Historian Rajni Kothari described the Indian political system as the ‘Congress system’ due to the dominance of the Congress party over the political field (Kothari, 1964). The Congress party was a broad-based nationalist movement before India’s independence in 1947 that transformed itself into a political party which governed by building consensus within its various competing factions that represented different interests (Kothari, 1964). The political party soon coalesced around the descendants of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who inherited and exploited his political legacy. The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty dominated Indian politics after independence, ruling the country for a substantial part of the period since its independence up until 2014. In fact, the “extraordinary prominence” of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty on India’s political system has “cast a shadow on the country’s democratic credentials” (Mitra, 2007, p. 129). The ruling dynasty increasingly resorted to a personalistic and populist ruling style which was further fueled with the leaders’ failure to deliver socio-economic promises (Kohli, 2001).
Kohli asserts that significant concentration of power in the hands of a few leaders is a salient feature of India’s democracy and the role played by India’s political leaders has been a major determinant of social and political change in the country (Kohli, 2001). Brass endorses this view underscoring “the premium on charismatic or demagogic leadership that can call upon appropriate loyalties at critical moments to transcend the features of routine politics identified above, particularly at the mass level” weakening institutions and political parties (Brass, 1994, p. 25).

The face of the most recent Congress-led government was Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, but party president Sonia Gandhi was thought to wield the real power behind the scenes. Many suspected that the installation of the anodyne, uncharismatic septuagenarian Manmohan Singh was a shrewd move to keep the throne safe for her son Rahul to inherit. After ten years of being in government, in coalitions called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which were dubbed UPA 1 and UPA 2 by the press, the Congress was defeated in the 2014 general elections by the right-wing political party, the BJP led by Narendra Modi.

Woven into this narrative of the Gandhis as embodiment of the nation is the theme of the sacrifices the Gandhi family have made for the country. Nehru’s daughter and India’s Prime Minister for nearly 15 years, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Her son Rajiv Gandhi won a landslide majority after the assassination of his mother, riding a huge wave of sympathy. He served as Prime Minister for 5 years until he too, was assassinated by Sri Lankan Tamil separatists in 1991. Many Indians have internalized this narrative of tragic service to the country, as is evident from this senior journalist’s views, “The Gandhi family enjoys that mystique, that aura. After all, would there be an Indian narrative without Nehru, Indira, Rajiv, Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel?” (Journalist, personal communication, 2015). As a result, the media contributed to justifying the paternalistic system the Gandhis built around themselves.

A veteran journalist observes the unquestioning deference afforded to the Gandhi family in a book he wrote on one of the worst episodes of communal violence the country has witnessed where thousands of Sikhs were massacred ostensibly to
avenge Indira Gandhi’s murder by her Sikh bodyguards. “There is excessive reverence to authority in our culture, not questioning enough. That is an in-built cultural factor anyway. The kind of coverage Rajiv Gandhi got days after the 1984 carnage for his first speech as Prime Minister in November 1984 within a fortnight of Indira Gandhi’s assassination. I looked up the speech and its overall tone and tenor. There was not a single mention of the killings in the very city where hundreds had been brutally killed. He went to the extent of saying I sympathize with you who are angry at her death. Yet the media was gushing about him, his youth and good looks in ’84-’85 till the Bofors corruption scandal happened. Till then he had a free run despite blood-soaked hands” (Journalist, personal communication, 2015).

For its part, the family has treated the press with a lofty indifference. They seldom grant interviews or open themselves to the prying eyes of the media (Dhume, 2014). According to Sonia Gandhi’s biographer, Rashid Kidwai, this reticence made her something regal” in the rambunctious Indian political landscape (Kidwai, 2011). The sycophantic culture of the Congress Party itself was such that it allowed the Nehru-Gandhis to “float like royalty above the muck of day-to-day politics” while other Congress party members outdid each other in trying to defend them and speak on their behalf (Dhume, 2012).

The rare interviews they granted were to ‘friendly’ journalists who knew that the prerequisite to getting an interview was not to ask uncomfortable questions. According to one of India’s most high-profile television journalists “none of us has been able to do a hard-hitting interview with Sonia Gandhi in the twenty years of her political life. Gandhis were able to maintain this forbidding wall around them as a result of which media was almost grateful even if they spoke a word to them. Their silence became their strength. Rather than ask a question, you were just so grateful if they spoke to you. We have generally been quite deferential to the ruling class and Gandhis used that to the hilt. There is a durbari [feudal] culture in Delhi. The one time I did manage to get an interview and ask a tough question, her reaction was hostile. In general, the media were almost grateful even if they [members of the
Gandhi family] spoke a word to them” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015).

According to another senior journalist, the penalty for transgressing the limits that the family set were that one was cut off from valuable social contacts: “Sonia Gandhi doesn’t invite you to her iftar party, or you invite her to a party and she doesn’t turn up. They cut off access. Signals are given like this” (Journalist, personal communication, May 26, 2015). Given the dominant position of the family in Indian politics before 2014, the threat of being excluded from the Gandhi circle meant being denied access to important sources and information.

“Except for the Gandhi family Congress is not a very unified group. Because of its history, it is more accommodative. I could still walk in to their homes or offices after having done a critical story. Why Gandhi family? Because ultimately it’s an oligarchy” (Journalist, personal communication, May 24, 2015).

As the Congress party has dominated the political landscape in India for half a century, they were also in a position to dispense favours and build a loyal coterie of journalists and editors, many in gatekeeping positions, who reinforced the self-censorship of the media on the Gandhi family. A political journalist who has worked in several media houses recounted his experience of working in India’s second largest English language national newspaper, widely seen as pro Congress:

“I remember doing a story on Rahul Gandhi in 2007-8. He had to take over as general secretary Youth Congress and NSUI. They started a cleansing process shunting out people older than Rahul. My political editor told me face to face that the owner doesn’t like these kind of stories... I don’t think he had got feedback from the Gandhi family or the newspaper owner. It was a common refrain in The Hindustan Times that this political editor was more loyal than the king, a bigger barrier than the owner” (Journalist, personal communication, November 8, 2014).

As Breed observed long ago in the literature on social control within a newsroom, this is how unwritten, tacit rules come to constitute editorial policies (Breed, 1955).
Another senior political reporter adds that much of this reverence for the Gandhis was built on material favours taken by journalists from successive Congress governments:

“…there is a whole culture in Delhi where people have got so many favours from the Congress as it has been in power so long. The whole idea of covering politics is to be embedded in a party. Journalists have taken houses from the government” (Journalist, personal communication, May 26, 2015)

Thus, the professional norms in the journalistic field need to be situated in the national cultural and social field where corruption and deference are pervasive and embedded (Rao U., 2013, p. 88).

This preparedness to cover the Gandhis with great circumspection was not, of course, complete. There would occasionally be critical coverage of the Gandhi family, particularly by the smaller but more adversarial publications. In such cases, when self-censorship by the media proved inadequate, it was shored up by direct censorship or external and overt pressures from the political field. A political editor of Outlook, a small but independent magazine, told this researcher that when she did a very critical piece on Sonia Gandhi during the UPA 2 regime, a close friend of the Gandhi family had paid her editor a visit to warn her that they could be critical about anyone else in the Congress party, including the Prime Minister, but the family was sacrosanct (Journalist, personal communication, May 26, 2015). She wrote the critical article anyway, knowing she had her magazine’s full support and she had very little to lose as the Gandhis gave no access to journalists like her. This attempt at direct pressure was not unique. Another veteran journalist talks about the ‘chamchas,’ [sycophants] who would underscore the message about staying off the Gandhi family to erring journalists or editors: “There was a reluctance to attack them directly. If needed, their displeasure would be conveyed through Ahmed Patel [a confidant of the Gandhi family]” (Journalist, personal communication, May 26, 2015).

State intervention through recourse to legal proceedings was another mechanism to ensure press silence. The Indian legal system is favourable to plaintiffs alleging
offense or defamation. Although the Gandhis themselves did not resort to this extreme tactic, their loyalists had litigious reputations: “A battery of Congress politicians are so litigation happy, like Kapil Sibal and Manish Tiwari; they would all come after you. No one wants to be sued for 100 crores. People want to avoid all the agony, and these are people in power. They have obvious influence” (Journalist, personal communication, November 8, 2014).

This entrenched system of power led to a culture of conformity in Indian journalism and, for many years, the whole Gandhi family had enjoyed what many called `kid-glove treatment from the press’ which, it was sometimes claimed, amounted to `omerta’ – a code of silence observed by almost everyone (Srinivasan, 2012).

How effective this code of silence could be can be illustrated by an example from as late as 2011. By this time, the family’s hold on power was already weakening as the result of a series of graft scandals, amongst which were rumours of the questionable business transactions of one of the members of the Gandhi family, Robert Vadra. An isolated story appeared as a straight news report in the country’s largest-circulation financial daily, The Economic Times, in 2011 revealing Vadra’s `low-key entry into the real estate business’ with the help of DLF Ltd., India’s largest commercial property developer (Singh & Sruthijith, 2011). Given his proximity to the Gandhi family and the fact that the Congress party was in government, it was evidently newsworthy, but the newspaper chose not to display it prominently. They framed it as a story about Vadra’s business dealings as an entrepreneur who had powerful connections, steering clear of any accusation about the systemic problem of crony capitalism. Though the story about `Robert, a Delhi businessman who has reportedly made millions of dollars in dodgy real estate deals in states under Congress rule’ published details of companies and bank loans, there was a conspicuous lack of follow up by the media (Dhume, 2012).

The newspaper article was not the result of investigations by the journalists involved. The information was leaked by a well-known political leader in the opposition BJP, who was handing out the documents to journalists in various media houses. According to a journalist then with The Times of India:
“The papers of Vadra’s land deals came to us from a very famous BJP politician. They came first to us at TOI. The editor said there is nothing illegal in this, there is no police case and it is only being alleged, so let’s not touch it. We turned it away. It appeared in The Economic Times a few weeks later. The source was Arun Jaitley [a BJP politician]. We did not verify it with the government or anyone else” (Journalist, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

Other media houses chose to ignore the story on the grounds that the allegations were motivated by political rivalry. No serious attempts were made to verify the story independently by journalists, as they felt that the chances of a story against the Gandhi family being published were remote. They had effectively internalized the tacit norm that families of the top-most politicians, particularly the Gandhi family, were sacrosanct.

In this case, another dimension to this ‘omerta’ was the involvement of the country’s largest real estate company DLF, a big advertiser in most media houses. A senior journalist said: “In the Vadra case, Arun Jaitley had the documents but DLF is a big advertiser. Also, media houses and journalists themselves have got real estate in favours. They are all thick as thieves. Choronki union [a band of thieves]” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015). As the editor of a leading national newspaper told this researcher, “Real estate is a big component in advertising. Almost a third of media’s advertising revenue comes from real estate companies” (Journalist, personal communication, May 24, 2015). In this case, there were both political and economic pressures on the journalistic field. On a crucial issue of public concern, journalists who had at least the basic information for an investigation chose to remain silent and took no steps to expose the Gandhis.

The evidence presented here suggests that Indian journalism has been historically subject to immense pressure from exogenous outside forces, notably those of ownership and political power. These factors are so persistent and insidious that, over time, journalists came to accept the limitations that they impose upon their daily practices as constitutive of the field of journalism. Over long periods of time, these constraints become so thoroughly accepted and internalized by journalists that they
no longer operate externally. The Gandhis seldom needed to intervene to threaten journalists and the invisibility of their corrupt practices was largely due to the self-censorship of the journalists themselves. There was implicit acceptance that this particular family was off-limits. As the power of the Gandhis waned, and the BJP emerged as a serious alternative, this situation began to change. In the aftermath of the revelations, faced with the weakening political power of the Gandhis and shift of allegiance of many business leaders, including press owners, towards the BJP, a space opened up around the 2014 election.

The code of silence cracks

By 2011, the dominance of the Congress had become vulnerable and with it came a change in the way the Gandhi family was reported. The country witnessed the rise of a civil society movement called `India Against Corruption’ (IAC) that exposed collusion between the political and economic elite. This movement resonated with rising popular anger and led to demonstrations against widespread corruption, inflation and slowing economic growth (Burke, 2011). IAC mobilizations got blanket TV coverage, led by the newly launched news channel Times Now. This newcomer was keen to establish itself in the competitive television news space, and it found that these protests were of enormous popular interest. Covering them resulted in a surge in viewership. Such coverage enabled IAC to dictate the political agenda, exposing the nexus of the political and economic elite along with the complicity of the mainstream media.

This popular movement changed the atmosphere surrounding high-level corruption. IAC held a press conference in early October 2012 to expose the dubious business dealings of Robert Vadra, alleging this was yet another instance of the crony capitalism that underscored the pervasive culture of corruption under the Congress-led coalition. The press conference divulged the same information first published by The Economic Times a year and a half ago, but this time every media house picked up the story and splashed it across their front pages. Faced with several corruption scandals and palpable popular anger, the decades of censorship around the Gandhi family began to unravel. Adding to the Congress party’s woes, a senior government
officer turned whistle-blower initiated an investigation into all of Robert Vadra’s land dealings which also got extensive coverage in the media. This kept the Vadra news story alive in the run-up to the next national election.

Members of the Gandhi family continued their policy of silence, giving no statements in public, nor taking questions from the press about the allegations of wrongdoing and impropriety in Vadra’s business dealings. This strategy was no longer enough to ensure the invisibility of the story. Nearly two years after the story in The Economic Times had been ignored by the rest of the press, the silence on the Gandhis had unravelled to the extent that Rahul Gandhi was widely ridiculed as a ‘dud’ lacking in charisma and political skills (The Economist, 2015). Opposition leader Narendra Modi attacked Rahul Gandhi’s dynastic origins calling him ‘Mr. Golden Spoon’ or ‘Shahzada’ [Prince] emphasizing his humble pedigree of a low-caste ‘chaiwallah’ [teaboy] in contrast (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Bottom up democratization had resulted in a profound change in the social landscape of Indian society and the rise of new political parties, which loosened the influence the Gandhis had over political institutions (Varshney A., Is India Becoming More Democratic?, 2000). These developments produced what can be described as a ‘critical juncture’ or a profound transformation in the political culture due in large measure to widespread anger about corruption in government and inflation, articulated by fledgling parties like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), an offshoot of the civil society movement IAC. Liberalization has resulted in an emerging aspirational class that wanted gainful employment, angry at the entrenched corruption and crony capitalism in the polity (Ganguly, The Risks Ahead, 2014). The scale and visibility of discontent was such that the media had no choice but to reflect it.

Though the Gandhis tried to deflect criticism by allowing the UPA Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to take much of the blame, nevertheless, the lack of governance and the scale of corruption sullied their image as well. The Gandhis had won a popular mandate by “shifting the debate from identity politics to distributive justice and secularism” in the first tenure of the Congress led UPA government between
2004-2009” (Hasan, 2013). However, they seemed to have lost steam in the tenure of the second Congress-led coalition government UPA-2.

“From 2004 to 2008, India experienced heady growth averaging 8 percent. The overall achievements of UPA-1 were considerable: the right to information act, the employment guarantee scheme, and larger allocations for the social sector. By comparison, UPA-2 appears unimaginative and purposeless: there is a rapid decline in economic growth, a resurgence of inflation hurting the ordinary people, stagnation in industry, infrastructural bottlenecks, and a middle class inspired civil society revolt against the corrupt and grasping political class” (Hasan, 2013). Their *aam aadmi* [common man]-centric platform was hijacked by parties like AAP, as “UPA-2 became a slave to neoliberalism, pampered big business, and facilitated the plunder of natural resources” (Bidwai, 2012). By this time, it was evident that the Congress was headed for defeat and to many it seemed the media threw its weight behind Narendra Modi in the run up to the elections.

**The Election Campaign**

The national elections in 2014 were the first elections that introduced the logic of “mediated populism” argue Chakravartty and Roy taking place under the glare of pervasive media presence including close to 800 television channels out of which 300 were twenty-four-hour news channels (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). While the censorship in the coverage of the Gandhi family broke down, questions about the role the media played in getting Modi elected arose almost immediately. Journalists observed the one-sided, wall-to-wall, “star struck” coverage and support the media gave him. There was an unprecedented mobilization of the economic elite behind Modi: Never before have big business houses and industrial groups so openly advocated the candidature of an individual (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). This shift in sentiment had its effect on the editorial policies of the overwhelmingly commercial media, a trend exacerbated by the takeover of the nation’s biggest media house, Network-18, by Reliance, the country’s biggest conglomerate.
Corporate media ownership was not the sole determinant of the emerging pattern of partisanship. There was an array of factors that mutually reinforced each other. According to one leading television journalist, TV was responsible for the exaggerated coverage. The BJP provided live coverage of Modi’s speeches at rallies and the broadcasters were happy to use them unaltered. “The nine months between August 2013 and May 2014 Modi dominated the airwaves. It was sustained carpet bombing. CMS survey shows Rahul hardly got any coverage. 70 percent of the coverage was Modi. As a profession we are a herd mentality. It is easy to blame ownership. The big story takes over. Times Now effect. Growing tabloidization constantly looking for the sensational, loud, the dramatic. TV has ceased to be a fact factory, it is now a sensations factory. No explainers or context is provided” (Journalist, personal communication, July 24, 2015).

Here, the journalist elucidates the effect the recently established English language news channel Times Now and its high-profile anchor Arnab Goswami have had on the television landscape and thus skewed the journalistic field in India. The channel was launched in 2006 and by 2008 had become “India’s most-watched English news channel” (Bhatia, 2012) with the anchor Arnab acquiring a cult following. The star anchor has subverted many of the rules of television journalism, adopting a “hectoring style” coupled with “aggressive emotional nationalism” that started off as an outsider taking on the governing elite including the journalistic elite (Bhatia, 2012). Along the way, Goswami came to occupy the right of center space, editorially whipping up a frenzied television as drama approach that put him squarely ahead in the race for viewership. Soon Times Now was setting the news agenda with the other news channels following its lead in terms of issues and perspectives to highlight, echoing Bourdieu’s contention that an agent with a large measure of cultural and economic capital can skew the entire field (Bhatia, 2012).

According to another interviewee, a leading television journalist and head of one of the top English language news channels at the time, there was no external pressure to promote Modi. Contrary to popular perception, it was the attraction of his campaign in televisual terms that won him so much coverage:
“The reason Modi was covered so extensively was just that he was selling, he was getting us the viewership and also that he was setting the agenda….The BJP had a clear, coherent and effective media strategy. We saw the benefit in TRP [viewership] terms of following Modi. He was able to set the narrative” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015).

Another senior television reporter echoes this view that the media, largely television, rode Modi’s popularity wave rather than create it as Modi’s election manifesto of good governance and development resonated with an electorate tired of the UPA’s venality and lack of performance. “Opinion was swung so much on the other side that we had to reflect that. Mostly it was rarara euphoric coverage though there was very little space for critical interrogation. Modi had a huge propaganda machine. Media didn’t create the wave, it rode it. So there was a wave. People wanted growth, jobs etc., but there was a fair amount of communalization. Strong Hindu assertiveness. Prevailing opinion was that he was our best possible chance. Overwhelming feeling of change. Two terms of the UPA had made everyone very impatient, the media rode this wave. Very little critical scrutiny and he himself had this huge publicity machine. Hologram, satellite, campaign songs, the whole thing was massive and the budget was something like 60,000 crores. They would give you live feed. They were working the media including social media platforms very well. It was a gigantic exercise on their part. On the other side there was nothing” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015).

Historically, the use of the media has been central to BJP’s historical project of political mobilization based on the construction of an imagined community defined by Hindu nationalism (Brosius, 2005; Rajagopal, 2001). As such, media has been far more integral to BJP’s politics than to Congress. Notable are the significant ruptures and tensions between national and subnational media, television, and newspapers that led Rajagopal (2001) to allude to a ‘split public’ (p. 151). The divide has particular relevance here as the elitist English language media has been accused of favoring the Western-educated, English-speaking Gandhis that has historically disregarded the “voice of the people” (Rajagopal, 2001). Modi exploited this
perception to portray himself as a meritocratic, son-of-the-soil nationalist. He accentuated the cleavage, recruiting the more compliant Hindi language media to ‘fashion a Hindu public’ (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 1). Modi has claimed that he might have been a different leader had the English language media not indulged in what he describes as “Modi-bashing” in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots (Ohm, 2015, p. 373).

However, these divisions may be overstated, particularly when examining the news media’s relationship with certain members of the political elite. Besides coercive political and economic pressures, the trend of commercialization and regionalization crosscuts both the English and vernacular language media in their pursuit of profits since liberalization resulted in greater similarity than is often assumed (Rao U., 2010). Chadha and Koliska’s study of regional television channels reinforces this picture of corrosive interpenetration of political and business interests resulting in significant censorial pressures and highly insecure working conditions for journalists (Chadha & Koliska, 2016). Additionally, journalists of the national press corps based in Delhi communicate with each other sharing information, having had long-standing professional relationships. While the English language media questioned Modi’s role in the 2002 communal massacre in the Indian state of Gujarat, the 2014 elections were remarkable for the ‘erasure’ of Modi’s association with violent Hinduism, indicating that the news media capitulated irrespective of the language division (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015, p. 318).

That is not to say that corporate ownership did not exacerbate this trend. According to one interviewee “Certain sections of the media, 3-4 channels went out of their way to support Modi, for example, Zee whose owner Subhash Chandra was seen in public rallies with Modi. Rajat Sharma who is a confidant of Modi’s. He repeated Modi’s interview before every election day. A section of news media was openly supporting Modi because of corporate ownership. A section of news media likes to be with the winner. A section was supporting him because we knew no better. So, the overall impression was that we were cheer leaders for Mr Modi” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015).
With the BJP proclaiming themselves champions of market-led growth, big capital’s enthusiasm for Modi was not surprising. Kaur locates the advent of Modi in the neoliberal transformation of the country or the process of corporatization of the state best embodied in the state’s description as ‘India Inc.’ (Kaur, 2015). Modi’s deliberately abstract but hopeful, catchy slogan of being the harbinger of ‘acche din’ [good times] and ‘sabka saath, sabka vikaas’ [With All, everyone’s development] burnished Brand Modi sedimenting the perception of there being no viable alternative to him (Kaur, 2015). These slogans as rhetorical devices obscured a lack of specific policies (Harvery, 2005).

While Modi as ‘vikas purush’ [development man] promised jobs and clean governance in his campaign, his track record as chief minister in the Western province of Gujarat for more than a decade he governed it, points to a political project that enables conditions for capital accumulation by economic elites in conjunction with constructing an exclusionary Hindu nation. Mishra describes Modi’s rhetoric as “aspirational neoliberalism” (Daniyal, 2017). With more than half the population of the country younger than 25, Modi tapped into and identified himself with aspirations of the beneficiaries of neoliberal reforms (Sinha, 2017) employing slogans like ‘yeh dil maange more’ [this heart desires more] wildly popular with the youth created by Pepsi Cola in one of its advertisements in India (Jaffrelot, 2013).

Thus, many journalists found it expedient to give up their public watchdog role as the interests of their media owners coincided with the majority of the public opinion. They could claim they were reflecting public sentiment in suspending critical judgment about the BJP leader and his campaign. One of the interviewees gave a detailed case of how pressure from proprietors and the dependence of the media upon advertising worked together in the print media. According to him, the well-endowed Modi campaign traded advertising for supportive material and editors who were not prepared to co-operate were replaced.

A senior editor, who had institutionalized an independent thinking and democratic news room in the magazine he ran, was one of those editors who was pressured to do
a cover story on Modi presenting him as a business messiah having presided over the economically successful business growth model of Gujarat, the state he governed as Chief Minister for 15 years. When he resisted, he was fired unceremoniously in 2013. “He went out on a limb to say that Forbes has always stood for right of center kind of journalism it champions, what you seem to be doing is not conforming to Forbes DNA. There was stunned silence in that room at that time…. XYZ asked me to do a cover on Modi in March. Given the fact that we have done a cover on Modi in the past why on earth are we doing this again. No no you might want to speak to Bibek Debroy known to be close to BJP. I said unless you have a better idea I will not commission this story. That’s not how we do cover stories, it takes a month sometimes 2 and there is a lot of scrutiny at the edit meeting itself. We don’t take unilateral arbitrary decisions. It’s clear that you want to take shortcuts and get a story out there” (Journalist, personal communication, April 22, 2015).

What he didn’t know at the time was that the media group, Network-18 that owned Forbes India was facing a financial crisis, had been taken over by Reliance, who had openly switched loyalty from the Congress party to Modi. Thus, an indebted media owner could not afford to upset his benefactors Reliance by doing stories critical of Modi and needed his editors to fall in line. Media critic and journalist Paranjoy Guha Thakurta asserts that “the biggest push for Modi has come from the overt push and advocacy of corporate leaders” (Pande, 2014).

A senior editor says it was a combination of a media that ideologically shifted its support towards a right leaning, pro-business Modi in addition to economic imperatives in a revenue driven business model. “Everyone worked out clear deals with the BJP’s election campaign managers, Arnab of Times Now, that was how largesse was distributed, if you didn’t make that commitment, there was no hope in hell that you would have got that money. Media houses worked out a level of support in return for advertising money. Worked out visibles with the BJP. Ad spend was unprecedented. It would work very well if there was an editor who was willing to fall in line. If you didn’t do that there was pressure applied like changing editors like Hartosh and Manu Joseph” (Journalist, personal communication, April 22, 2015).
Studies reveal that the 2014 national elections were the most expensive in Indian history, expenditure on the campaign was a staggering 5 billion US dollars, next only to the money spent in elections in the US (Gottipati & Singh, 2014). The BJP far outspent its rival the Congress in expenditure on advertising as corporate houses saw Modi as favorable to business and went out of their way to finance his campaign. The BJP had a substantial advantage in the deployment of social media, technology and money over the Congress (Sridharan, 2014).

Sinha has written an excellent article on how Modi and his team recruited television and social media to craft a transformation for Modi’s image to constitute “Modi as a political brand, as a political style, and as a populist political project (Sinha, 2017, p. 4158). Modi was an early adopter of participatory technologies and employed them to great advantage particularly in engaging with first time urban voters (Chadha & Guha, 2016). He constructed media narratives that appealed to diverse social groups, mobilizing them behind his claims of “developmental sovereignty” ratified by “the people” (Sinha, 2017, p. 4158) saturating public space (Jaffrelot, 2015). This included a deliberate toning down of the strident Hindu nationalist agenda and the violent trajectories of Hindu nationalism associated with the right wing BJP, particularly the controversial chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat, to appeal to a wider public (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). The overarching theme was economic development addressing voters in a thousand political rallies across the length and breadth of the country via hologram (Ganguly, 2014). Jaffrelot describes this as the “most impressive communication campaign India had seen since Indira Gandhi in 1971” when her slogan of ‘garibi hatao’ [Remove Poverty] had resounded across the nation (Jaffrelot, 2015, p. 155).

Overall, the BJP engineered a decisive shift in the political discourse in the run up to the historic 2014 elections such that perceptions of Modi as an incomparable visionary were rendered common sense, obscuring his close association with violent Hindu nationalism (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). And in this, the news media played a salient role, pre-empting, reflecting and magnifying enthusiasm for Modi (Rajagopal A., 2014).
Building a new order

The combination of the failings of Congress, the vigor of Modi’s campaign, buttressed by heavy media support won the BJP an overwhelming electoral victory. This landslide win seemed to have validated the media’s uncritical, adulatory portrayal of Modi as an ‘iron man with a 56 inch chest’ who would be the ‘harbinger of good days’ for India, spawning a new culture of journalistic deference (Sinha, 2017). Electoral results as decisive as these ensured there was “very little space for critical interrogation by the media” (Journalist, personal communication, June 11, 2015) attributing the victory to his authoritative personality and mass appeal rather than the organization of the political party BJP.

Concomitantly, the new government set about sending an unambiguous message that it did not welcome critical scrutiny and dissent. Modi controlled and channeled information very carefully at the national level after his electoral victory as he did prior to it (Ohm, 2015). Media control was achieved through various means, including external pressures exerted by the political and economic field. In the political field, there has been a clear centralization of power, with a feeble opposition and power in the government largely exercised by Modi and his two colleagues, Amit Shah, leader of the BJP, and Arun Jaitley, who initially held dual responsibility for both Finance and Information and Broadcasting.

The media were given very little access to the Prime Minister after the election. Modi did away with the traditional routines like taking journalists with him on trips to foreign countries, holding press conferences, or even appointing a press advisor. Most of his colleagues in the government, ministers and other BJP politicians have been instructed not to communicate with the media (Ohm, 2015). Journalists have no government spokesperson they can get in touch with to get its point of view.

Modi has shown a very public contempt and disdain for the press: “No question that they have a contempt for the media that is beyond bizarre. A serving minister calls us ‘presstitutes’. The Prime Minister calls us press traders. He backs the guy who calls us ‘presstitutes’. He doesn’t need a press advisor. We in the media don’t know who
to reach out to if we need a comment from the Prime Minister’s Office’ (Journalist, personal communication, June 10, 2015). By cutting off these traditional means of access, the government delivered the message that it did not need the mainstream media to communicate with the public since Modi used social media like Twitter to reach out to them directly (Sinha, 2017). “What Modi has done, instead, is to remove his own actions and politics from public scrutiny” thereby democratically securing his own intangibility (Ohm, 2015, p. 373).

The concentration of political power in so few hands has implications for the media as business since: ‘Jaitley is both Finance Minister and Information & Broadcasting minister. Which corporate house is going to follow journalistic policies which will offend the Finance Minister of the country when licenses and permissions are at stake? When clearances are at stake? Fear is being deployed at the highest levels.’ (Journalist, personal communication, May 25, 2015)

There was also an attempt to diminish the legitimacy of many of those institutions that could question the governing elite like the judiciary besides the press.

“In the run up itself, owners were positioning themselves to get favors. Nothing coercive but owners positioning themselves. Also government is clearly sending out a message that we don’t welcome dissent. Media is part of a set of institutions that question authority, judiciary. Modi publicly said about judiciary. Crackdown on NGOs, attempt to whittle down the Right to Information act. The message is that if you disagree with us that is not welcomed by this administration. They want to label disagreement as anti-national or erroneous. Want to clampdown” (Journalist, personal communication, May 25, 2015).

According to one interviewee, although the new code resembled that governing coverage of the Gandhis in previous years, the basis was rather different:

“There is a difference in kid glove treatment of the Gandhis and Modi. In the case of the Gandhis, there was ideological kinship between Congress’s left liberal values and the journalists of that time. There was some reverence for the Gandhis. But it was not mainly because of fear. It was really about losing access and being part of the
charmed circle. Here it is the effect of the triumphalism that is emerging because of a Hindu right-wing leader. It is fear at work” (Journalist, personal communication, May 25, 2015).

One concrete example of this new climate is provided by a well-known TV anchor who recounted how the owner of the news channel she worked for made it evident that her kind of journalism, associated with left liberal secular values, was discordant with the popular sentiment and insisted she quit: “Post this huge Modi victory I got the sense that I was on the sack list. The minute Modi came with that kind of majority they wanted AAA and me out.” The anchor had previously produced critical coverage about Modi’s role in communal riots, his abandonment of his wife, and she knew that the owner was unhappy about her stance. One of the programs she made discussed whether this new government would tolerate dissent (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2014). As a result, she got a letter from the network owner directing her not to appear on air. With the network having been taken over by Reliance, who had publicly allied themselves with the new regime, she argues it is hard to tell whether this move was the result of political or commercial pressure since the two are so deeply intertwined (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2014).

The intense pressure experienced by the media in the aftermath of Modi’s election led to limited critical coverage of the government’s activities. The close alliance between the politicians and the leaders of Indian business has had a deterrent effect throughout the media. This attitude was assisted by a new breed of journalists, nurtured in the post liberalization, consumerist era that unleashed entrepreneurial impulses in the Indian middle classes. Their underlying views accord much better with the pro-business and Hindu-chauvinist view expressed by the BJP and, even more strongly, by its associates like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). One prominent journalist summed up the mood in the media:

“Modi also faced scrutiny [in the past] by the pro left journalists. This Westernized school of journalists were being replaced in the last 15 years or so. In the 2000s, a new generation of largely right-wing journalists were recruited and many of them are
ideologically very close to RSS” (Journalist, personal communication, May 24, 2015).

A combination of political and economic pressures, together with a generational change within the journalistic field thus allowed the new government very quickly to construct a self-stifling system similar to the one long practised by the Gandhis. It is distinguished by being much less long-established, and thus much less thoroughly internalized by journalists than the old order, and as a consequence it relies more heavily on political and economic threats rather than a tacit understanding of the limits of reporting to ensure conformity.

After Modi’s victory, economic and political power together worked to re-establish the subordination of journalistic field to heteronymous forces. The BJP government was as contemptuous of the media as the Congress had been and attempted to bypass them and find ways to get their message directly to the population. The government, and many of its sympathizers, began to exert pressure for increased direct censorship, notably on religious grounds. The Modi regime has made frequent overt censorial interventions reminiscent of authoritarian structures in an effort to achieve the required “chilling effect” (Gans, 1979, p. 249). For their part, the owners of the major media made it very clear to their employees that deference to Modi and his colleagues was now the preferred mode for reporting, and at least some dissidents lost their jobs for refusing to comply.

This new code of silence, however, differed from the old regime in two important ways. In the first place, the ready acceptance of deference to the BJP had not yet established itself as the common sense of journalistic practices, and invited minor acts of rebellion by some journalists. This was a window of ideological contestation between the left, liberal values that had dominated the intellectual and journalistic elite and the neoliberal, right wing elite aligned to the new dispensation. Secondly, the journalistic field is populated with a variety of different media, some of which are more participatory and interactive in nature than the mainstream media. The latter no longer control communication in the public sphere, and has found its silence and bias challenged. When, as in the 2015 Delhi elections, a popular outside force
challenged the BJP, even those media that were normally closely allied with Modi were, eventually, obliged to recognize the fact that public opinion was massively opposed to the government, and their failure to reflect the opposition would mean a significant loss to their credibility.

It is also important to note the role of non-state actors in creating an environment of intolerance and censorship. There has been a surge in censorship and violence against journalists critical of the BJP government. The most brutal reminder of this was the killing of a journalist Gauri Lankesh, a vocal critic of Modi and right-wing Hindu nationalism in one of the country’s biggest cities Bangalore (Doshi, 2017). Nearly 30 journalists have been killed in India since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. India has steadily fallen in various reports that rank press freedom in 2017.

In his study of political change, Kohli highlights a pattern of populist leaders who have been unable to deliver on promises that raises aspirations without satisfying them continually contributing to the growing crisis of governability in India (Kohli, 2001). Leaders have attempted centralizing power as is evident in Modi’s government to preserve their personal power but that has been accompanied by deinstitutionalizing democracy and the state’s ability to accomplish socio-economic goals (Kohli, 2001).

**Weaknesses in the new structure**

However, the weakness of this new order was illustrated in the 2015 provincial elections in the national capital Delhi. Before the elections, there was a concerted effort to black out the anti-corruption political party, Aam Aadmi Party [AAP, or the Party of the Common Man] election campaign. The AAP relentlessly exposed crony capitalism and corporate corruption embedded in the power structure causing anxiety among corporate bosses who also own media houses. The cloak of invisibility that the mainstream media tried to throw over this campaign reflected the intense economic and political pressure they were experiencing as a result of AAP’s campaign against the nexus between the political and economic elite. A Delhi
reporter in *The Times of India* said that, until three days before the Delhi elections in 2013, they were projecting that the BJP would emerge victorious, deliberately ignoring the groundswell of popular support for the AAP. It was made clear in editorial meetings that any story that seemed to indicate AAP was ahead in the electoral race would not be published: “Journalists get a sense of which way wind is blowing in editorial meetings. The editor says no, no, no and the reporter gets it” (Journalist, personal communication, May 27, 2015). It was not until barely three days before the vote that their editor realized that the paper could not afford to ignore reality any longer, since AAP was quite evidently headed for an overwhelming victory.

It was a similar story in broadcasting. ‘While devoting excessive airtime to Modi, some channels took the extreme step of blanking him (Kejriwal – the AAP leader) and his party out of their channels. The AAP leaders were not to be called upon to participate in studio discussions” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015). Defying predictions, AAP won 67 out of 70 seats, routing the BJP in the elections. Homogenous media messages eulogizing the ‘Modi juggernaut’ were clearly discordant with reality. AAP could not be ignored after the victory but there was a concerted effort by the media to delegitimize AAP by projecting it as an unwieldy party of anarchists that subscribed to a politics of protest (Journalist, personal communication, May 25, 2014).

For most of the campaign, the political role of the media was to constrain rather than facilitate democratic consolidation, but the pressure of a popular mobilization was in this instance great enough to force them belatedly to change the character of their reporting. The pressure from the political and economic elite was not countered from within the journalistic field itself: it was only neutralized by another external force. As one interviewee remarked, the election illustrated the limit upon the complete instrumentalization of the press by the political and economic elite:

“The timidity of journalists is built on their second-guessing what owners want, but as public mood starts changing and they see a weakness in the kind of control this government can wield, they will push the boundaries more and more. That omerta
around the Gandhis is much stronger than anything I have seen around Modi…. It took a long time to break it, but when there is a change in public mood, institutionally the media starts to reflect that. We are corporatized and compromised but we are not controlled or destroyed. There is still that distinction” (Journalist, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

Another journalist says that leading newspapers like The Times of India and the Hindustan Times are very conscious that they have a brand that they must protect and that this is balanced against their fear of Modi and his backers. Both owners and journalists are, for different reasons, concerned to maintain their credibility. The owners are keen to be on the right side of whoever has political power and because they do business not just with the central government but in states controlled by other parties they cannot be entirely supportive of the BJP. There is a continuous monitoring of the public mood by the journalists, and if they sense that an opportunity presents itself to restore their journalistic autonomy then they seize it (Journalist, personal communication, May 27, 2015).

Unlike in the era when the sway of the Gandhis over their media portrayal was unquestioned, the Modi government enjoys a more limited and provisional support from the media. Nevertheless, they still enjoy considerable freedom from criticism. The combined pressures of political power and economic control are supplemented by a high degree of self-censorship on the part of journalists. The relative fragility of the new arrangement is partly explicable by structural changes to the mass media, particularly the growth of online news outlets. Despite conformity of the press on certain taboo areas, some journalists contend there is still far more information in the public sphere today. “Media are far more democratic. Today you have to make the calls as the kind of people who have come in are very different, the array of news that is covered is far wider, the impact the media has on people is also far wider. More and more the media has done what is its essential role to be a sceptic of the exercise of power, to examine how anyone wields power. In totality more of it is happening than before but it has run into serious constraints” (Journalist, personal communication, May 27, 2015).
Within the overall wariness of the media, journalists and media houses have adopted tacit strategies to be able to do critical stories once in a while. As a journalist says they might do a critical piece on Modi or Amit Shah but then carry a very negative piece on the Congress heir apparent Rahul Gandhi the next day to “balance it out” (Journalist, personal communication, June 3, 2015).

New Institutionalism theorists argue that responses to challenges can lead to institutional change and that researchers need to pay close attention to the challenges facing journalism, and to accompanying adjustments and reorientations within the profession. In this case, the response to the crisis of ownership and thus instrumentalization of the press has been to drive critical adversarial journalism online. A slew of alternative online news websites have proliferated (The Wire, Scroll.in, The Caravan among others) in the past few years. Some were established by independent journalists who found they were inconvenient to owners in the mainstream news media, and who exploited the low entry barriers to setting up news websites. Many of these independent websites engage in what Cherian George describes as ‘contentious journalism’ or stories critical of the current dispensation for which they get the most number of ‘hits’ or readers, thus creating spaces to contest power (Journalist, personal communication, May 25, 2015). The diverse and more participatory media landscape in a country with a vibrant civil society places limits on censorial processes. “The saviour will be that the media is inchoate, huge, with lots of little voices here and there. The sheer hugeness of it will prevent censorship” (Journalist, personal communication, May 23, 2015).

New institutional theory tends to argue that it is necessary to separate the influence of political and economic forces, since these may not always work in tandem (Cook, 1998; Kaplan, 2006; Sparrow, 1999). AAP was a civil society movement eventually morphing into a political group that pierced the ‘omerta’ around the Gandhis, both the established political and economic powers acted together to impose their will upon the media. Political and economic power in a country like India tends to be intertwined to a much higher degree than in a developed country. As a consequence, there is a greater tendency for both of these heteronymous forces to exert pressure on
the journalistic field from the same direction. The consequence is that, even in normal times, the latter enjoys limited autonomy than is the case in France or the US.

It is only in circumstances when there are conflicting macro forces acting upon the journalistic field that one can observe a significant degree of autonomy. These circumstances can arise in periods when the shape of the alliance between economic forces and political actors are changing, as in the shift from Congress to the BJP. They can also arise when a third, external, force, in the shape of massive popular opposition to the business-political alliance, renders complete subservience to the latter impossible to reconcile with the continued credibility of the journalistic field as a whole. Taken together, these modifications suggest that the notion of the journalistic field needs to be recast. In the work of Bourdieu, and many of his followers, there has been an assumption that the natural state of the field is one of autonomy. Bourdieu insists that even the journalistic field, weakly autonomous though it may be, possesses a degree of autonomy and is best understood as a microcosm set within a macrocosm – “it obeys its own laws, its own nomos” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 33). However, this research suggests that the heteronomy of the dominant political elite whether it was the Gandhis or Modi, usually converging with pressures from the economic field, emasculates the media logic of the field. Historically, in the coverage of the power elite, the journalistic field does become reducible to external forces. This in turn has implications for the notion of journalism as an institution which hasn’t been able to build clear field boundaries; thus, we need to heed Scott’s suggestion to treat institutionalization as an ‘empirical question’ (Scott, 2014, p. 187).

Overall, Ursula Rao argues persuasively that political reporting has become more critical demanding greater accountability (Rao, 2013). This is a byproduct of commercialization that has made the press less reliant on political financing. While not disregarding the watchdog role played by the news media, the overarching narrative that emerges is one of submissiveness to the dominant political elite. Despite the large numbers of media outlets, the media system does not parallel the political divisions as much as it disproportionately leans towards the political group
that happens to hold a hegemonic position at the time. Thus, it may be more appropriate to reconceptualize Hallin and Mancini’s dimension of political parallelism as ‘power parallelism’ to describe the media structure in the Indian context (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).
Chapter 7

Reliance – A ‘Parallel State’

Introduction

This chapter seeks to examine the relationship between the economic elite and journalism in the world’s largest democracy in a period that has witnessed a closer, more unequivocal, embrace of neoliberalism by the Indian polity. The state’s embrace of business became salient in a series of large-scale corruption scandals that convulsed the country after 2008 (Bardhan, 2001). The growing state-business proximity has resulted in profound changes in the nature and business of journalism. It has exacerbated external heteronomous pressures on journalism in India which leads to friction with its increasingly central role in political processes of the democracy. To illuminate the relationship between journalism and the economic elite, this study analyzes the constraints exerted by the country’s richest business house to impede critical and free journalism. The mainstream news media suppressed news about one of the largest corruption scandals in the history of independent India involving collusion between the state and the country’s biggest conglomerate Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and its owners. Examining the news media’s reportage on this scandal, this research analyzes the news media’s relationship with Reliance, a hegemonic player in India’s crony capitalist political economy after economic restructuring in 1991; and the developments that precipitated Reliance’s acquisition of the country’s biggest media network in 2014.

Through this case study, the paper seeks to explore and illuminate 1) nature of the relationship and linkages between dominant private capital and the field of journalism 2) the role journalism plays in the interaction between and at the intersection of economics of liberalization and politics of empowerment in the Indian polity.

Reliance, accounts for nearly one-third of the total profits of India’s private sector and is ranked 203 in the list of world’s largest 500 companies (Rai, 2004). However,
these statistics are far from adequate in conveying its influence and role in the Indian polity. Reliance’s ability to manipulate the political environment and wield influence over government and policy formation has been legendary (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). This accords with scholarship that contends that business groups like Reliance have been first among equals exercising much greater power than other interest groups over the polity endangering democracy (Nayyar, 2001).

The sway India’s biggest private sector company Reliance has held on India’s economic and political fortunes can perhaps be best described in the words of public intellectual Gopalkrishna Gandhi who called it a ‘parallel state’ rather than a private company. “I do not know of any country where one single firm exercises such power so brazenly” said Gandhi (PTI, 2014). Reliance is owned by the Ambani family.

It was the mainstream media’s attempt to blackout Reliance’s extensive involvement in the country’s biggest corruption scandal in 2011 that underscored the extent of the media’s subordination to big business. The media described this as the ‘gas pricing’ issue, epitomizing the salient role the Indian government has played in the “corporate carve up of India’s economic resources” (Thomas P., 2014, p. 478). However, profound transformation in the political landscape disrupted this cloak of invisibility the media threw over the scandal. These developments catalyzed a radical restructuring of the media political economy with Reliance taking over the country’s biggest media network, becoming one of the largest stakeholders in it. This was a particularly egregious manifestation of the radical changes in the business of journalism unleashed by India’s neoliberal shift.

A discussion of the state-capital relations and their evolution has been discussed in the background chapter but the salient points are reiterated here. While India was a command economy with a highly interventionist state, scholars have argued that private capital has always wielded significant power (Bardhan, 2001; Chibber, 2003; Kohli, 2007; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Chibber have compared the evolution and trajectories of India and South Korea to conclude that the Indian state lacked the capacity to discipline private capital and the import substitution regime pursued led to ‘oceans of profits’ for select business houses (Chibber, 2003; Chibber & Usmani,
South Korea on the other hand could extract performance from its capitalists in lieu of the subsidies given to them. While a narrow group of capitalists benefited hugely from the subsidies given to them by the state, the country’s economic growth remained abysmal leading to a sharp increase in incidence of poverty during the 1960s (Nayyar, 2001). The government increasingly tilted towards business, particularly domestic business, in an attempt to boost economic growth. A balance of payments crisis in 1991 allowed the Indian government the opportunity to liberalize a socialist planned economy fettered by a convoluted web of licenses and regulation. The economy has grown at a rapid pace since then “steered by an alliance of state and private capital” (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019, p. 11) highlighting the enduring and entrenched crony capitalist nature of the polity. Although capital was always powerful, restructuring the economy has increased the power of business further with the suspicion that it might have acquired a near hegemonic status (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019). This suspicion was strengthened when the 2014 elections brought Narendra Modi to power, probably the first candidate to have been publicly endorsed and actively campaigned for by private capital (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019). However, there are political variables that limit the power of business-like electoral competition and intra-elite struggles for power (Kohli, 2001).

There is a wide-ranging consensus on prioritizing rapid economic growth led by private capital in the polity even as the benefits of this growth have disproportionately been accumulated by the capitalist class (Chatterjee, 2008). Thus, support for the state’s policy of rapid economic growth is likely to continue whatever arrangement of political parties forms the government at the center. There are fears that the state is increasingly obliging narrow, private interests neglecting its public and distributional role (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019). Chatterjee asserts that “the capitalist class has come to acquire a position of moral-political hegemony over civil society, consisting principally of the urban middle classes. It exercises its considerable influence over both the central and the state governments not through electoral mobilization of political parties and movements but largely through the bureaucratic-managerial class, the increasingly influential print and visual media, and the judiciary and other independent regulatory bodies (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 57). Others
have also underscored the role played by the media in enabling a big ideological change in favor of private capital in India post liberalization by creating a cultural context in which disproportionate capitalist dominance seems natural and inevitable (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019). Bardhan underscores the fact that support for economic reforms was largely limited to the English media and upper classes both of whom were substantial beneficiaries of the expansion of the markets (Bardhan, 2001).

Scholars have demonstrated how this shift in the balance of power between the state and market was in fact a shift towards business rather than market (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019; Rodrik & Subramaniam, 2004). This has significant implications – a pro-market orientation would aim to create a level playing field of new entrants and consumers by removing barriers. However, a pro-business orientation as adopted by India focused on making established domestic businesses like Reliance more profitable (Rodrik & Subramaniam, 2004). Domestic private capitalists were opposed to genuine liberalization as it would challenge their dominance. Economic restructuring adopted pro-business measures that directly benefited established players like Reliance by reducing corporate taxes and removing price controls (Rodrik & Subramaniam, 2004). It is no surprise that Reliance has been one of the largest beneficiaries of economic restructuring undertaken by India in 1991 (Roy, 2005).

However, the transformation in the relationship between the state and market needs to be qualified. While the power of business has grown, the state has not necessarily retreated (Bardhan, 2001). Post liberalization, the state’s patronage has relocated and it still remains in a position to distribute largesse as public enterprises privatize (Chandra, 2015). It retains considerable discretionary powers in the policy process. Chandra contends that patronage and cronyism are salient features of the state-capital relationship (Chandra, 2015) as was evidenced in the conversations between lobbyist Nira Radia, politicians and business leaders. Competition over state-controlled economic resources fragments private capital which is not always monolithic, limiting their power (Kohli, 2001). Broadly, interpenetrating political and economic
interests with business infiltrating politics more than ever before is a salient feature of the polity.

However, the state in a country as poor and unequal as India cannot always afford to be hand in glove with business as political groups need to win elections and a vast majority of the electorate is excluded by the markets (Kohli, 2012). Consolidation of India’s political democracy imposes limits on the expansion of the power of business. Nayyar elaborates on the “tension between the economics of markets and the politics of democracy” which creates disjunctures between the state and business (Nayyar, 2001, p. 364). Democracy has struck deep roots because of decades of exercise of universal franchise in the country. There has been a “consolidation of the subaltern classes who recognized that their political identity made their right to vote that much more potent” (Nayyar, 2001, p. 382). There has been a growing democratization of traditional power relations who are claiming political rights from below employing categories like caste and religion (Kohli, 2001; Varshney, 2000). The economic benefits of liberalization have largely bypassed them even as politics has empowered them. This leads to a conflict between the sphere of economics and the realm of politics with both moving in the opposite direction which has significant implications for the news media (Nayyar, 2001, p. 393).

The following section sketches out the main developments and contours of the evolving relationship between Reliance, the power structure and the news media before discussing its implications for the business of news and journalistic practice.

**Points of Rupture - The Warring Brothers**

Reliance grew from a small textile company to a conglomerate in an era when private capital had not yet been liberated from state control. Politics of patronage and distribution of subsidies created “vast oceans of profits for the largest business houses” (Chibber & Usmani, 2013, p. 208; Kohli, 2001). There was a decisive and open pro-business shift in the political culture by 1985 presaging liberalization (Chibber, 2003). These were the decades dominated by the Congress party and its leader Indira Gandhi and later her son Rajiv Gandhi, both of whom industrialist
Dhirubhai Ambani cultivated assiduously. Interpenetrating economic and political interests soon resulted in Reliance occupying a hegemonic position in the Indian economy.

A business reporter who was one of the few to expose a big financial scam recalls that business writing at the time was obsequious. “Journalists were stenographers. Business owners would summon and give dictation to the city editor” (Journalist, personal communication, May 22, 2015). “Businessmen are more sensitive. They have long been used to PR like coverage. Aditya Birla took us to court” (Journalist, personal communication, June 3, 2015). By and large, there has been an implicit understanding among journalists in the last few decades that “Reliance and Tatas are the holiest of holies” (Journalist, personal communication, November 22, 2015). With interests in almost every sector, private company, Tata, is a household name in India along with Reliance.

A business reporter based in Mumbai who has been covering Reliance since the 1980s describes the crude methods Reliance employed to ensure the press’ subservience. The company would hand out expensive suit lengths and Kanjeevaram [type of expensive silk] saris to journalists at their press conferences when textile manufacturing was their predominant business. He explained why their name evokes fear alongside awe at their success. “They would ‘fix’ journalists either by bribing them or resorting to violence if they proved recalcitrant. There were horrific stories on what all they did to people” (Journalist, personal communication, November 17, 2015). New institutional theory also underscores how myths, dogmas and prejudices can contribute to solidifying norms that structure human action and result in conformity among journalists (North, 1993). Thus, teasing out the influence of ideologies and myths helps illuminate journalistic practice in the Indian context and wholesale homogeneity in coverage of big businesses like Reliance.

Additionally, new institutional thinking proposes the greater the uncertainty the greater the homogeneity in journalistic practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the Indian context, a feeble adherence to law and written rules, arbitrary termination of
employment by owners, a weak regulatory environment has meant a highly uncertain media environment for journalists as business houses have employed multiple ways to control media coverage including using their money power to harass the media through legal notices alleging defamation seeking huge monetary damages. The uncertainty principle has meant general precaution in covering business matters particularly Reliance historically.

Market-oriented reforms did eliminate some points of collusion between business and government but created new ones – privatization of state firms and natural resources (Maxfield & Schneider, 1997). Reliance entered the lucrative oil and gas exploration business around liberalization with allegations of the government bending rules to favor it (Roy & Thakurta, 2016). The company quickly became the country’s biggest private sector oil company becoming even more profitable.

However, the fraught question of succession in Reliance after the patriarch and founder of the group, Dhirubhai Ambani’s death in 2002, punctured the widely held perception of its invincibility (Economist, 2011). What followed was an acrimonious feud between the brothers over the division of Reliance exposing the convoluted web of surrogate companies and opaque funding procedures on which the behemoth was built. Elite dissensus opened up space for the media to be independent as political economists contend.

“The game changed when the brothers fought. All the things we journalists knew but didn’t dare write about started coming out because it was being planted in the media by the Ambani brothers themselves. Once they sank to that level the aura they had built on fear about them was gone” (Journalist, personal communication, December 8, 2015). She takes care to point out that it wasn’t investigative work by journalists that exposed the unseemly rift and unscrupulous business practices Reliance had undertaken but leaks by the stakeholders in an effort to undermine each other. This underlines the limits of the press as a watchdog in the Indian democratic set up historically.

There was a deluge of information leaked by the two brothers to malign each other. In the process, details about their dubious dealings spilled into the public domain
with television leading the media frenzy (McDonald, 2010). “This was better than any soap opera and viewers couldn’t get enough” describes a news editor at one of the leading business news channels (Journalist, personal communication, December 19, 2015) underscoring the role of television in inter-media agenda setting and shaping the news. The story with its lurid details about feuding brothers and their wives had enormous appeal for private television news channels competing to capture the growing advertising revenues (Athique, 2012; Thussu, 2007).

Herman and Chomsky’s contention that dissensus amongst the elite allows the media an opportunity to overcome constraints imposed by the political economy of the media held true in the instance of a feud between the Ambani brothers. This provided a rare window when the implicit understanding among journalists that reporting on Reliance is taboo broke down allowing reportage on the feud with information being leaked by the two camps against each other. Thus, limits are placed on media’s instrumentalization by factors such as internal heterogeneity of capital or in other words business interests not being monolithic (Jaffrelot, et al., 2019) and competition over state controlled economic resources.

However, strategic allocation of their significant advertising budget by Reliance in a revenue driven media business model coupled with a rapprochement between the warring brothers reaching an agreement on amicable division of assets countered adverse coverage of the group.

**Point of Rupture – The Gas Pricing Scandal**

The extent of the news media’s subordination to Reliance became salient when it ignored large scale malfeasance by Reliance in what came to be known as the ‘gas pricing’ scandal in the contract awarded to mine one of the biggest gas reserves in the country. The national mainstream press ignored it for over five years until the constitutional body of Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), tasked with overseeing the functioning of the government, published a harsh indictment of the government’s collusion with Reliance. The CAG’s report accused the incumbent UPA government of violating all rules to “oblige” RIL in exploration of the
country’s natural reserves of gas in the Krishna Godavari (KG) basin off the Western shore of India’s coastline (Mehdudia, 2011).

This is inarguably one of the biggest corruption scandals in independent India. Much of the information released by the CAG was already in the public domain. In fact, the cost of the oil and gas produced from the Krishna Godavari oil fields were at the heart of the feud between older brother Mukesh and younger brother Anil Ambani. The younger sibling had divulged significant details of the blatant irregularities in the contract an undivided Reliance had bagged to explore natural gas and oil from the D6 oil field in the KG basin. The stakes were high as the oil field had the potential to contribute 20 billion dollars to the country’s GDP (Ramesh, 2009).

Members of the Left parties in Parliament had attempted to publicize the mammoth scandal in plundering the country’s natural resources as early as 2006 (Bhatt, 2011). Yet, most of the national media ignored the story despite its magnitude, and journalists in most major media organizations were told to stay off covering the issue.

“Before the CAG’s report was published, my editor told me all these allegations are bunkum. When your editor has such a strong opinion, you know which way the wind is blowing. The same editor later joined Reliance as head of corporate communications. It’s not hard to put two and two together” (Journalist, personal communication, November 19, 2015)

“Nobody understood the gas pricing issue. Even people don’t care. Unless you get a sensational twist like the CAG putting out a huge number like 1 lakh crores [15 billion US dollars] of loss to the exchequer it doesn’t make headlines” (Journalist, personal communication, November 21, 2015)

A desk editor at a national newspaper that promotes itself as investigative admitted, “I honestly don’t think my editor who managed the editorial pages understood the issue. She said it was too complicated. Also, we were told we were a political newspaper and that as a policy we don’t do micro edits on private companies” (Journalist, personal communication, December 2, 2015)
“Nira Radia was managing everything very well through ads so no one wanted to write about it” (Journalist, personal communication, November 26, 2015). Radia was the lobbyist who represented the Ambanis among other businesses.

There were exceptions to this conformity. In contrast to the silence in the mainstream press on a national scandal, smaller media outlets and independent journalists, particularly online, kept the issue alive. The small but influential weekly publication *Outlook* published cover stories on the issue titled ‘The Great Gas Heist’ and ‘D6 and All that Gas’. *Outlook* had already established a reputation for holding power to account led by its redoubtable founding editor Vinod Mehta.

“We are looking at what Gopal Gandhi called the second republic, the parallel republic. If we do not examine what the parallel republic is doing in conjunction with the real republic we are not in the right business. We spent 4 days incoming up with that number of 54,500 crore rupees [7 billion US dollars], till then no one had a number for the KG (Krishna Godavari) basin. My view is unless you have a number, people will not understand” (Journalist, personal communication, December 3, 2015).

However, the flood gates opened once CAG legitimized the information in its 2011 report which confirmed what the Left party CPI(M) had been alleging for 5-6 years (Mehdudia, 2011). Every media outlet that had ignored the story so far, reproduced it, followed by editorials critical of the government. Concomitantly, several corruption scandals were being exposed and threatening to hit an increasingly vulnerable government. There was increasing public anger at rising prices, pervasive corruption, crony capitalism and a slowing economy.

An eminent journalist explains this unusual independence shown by the press on this occasion: “It is still a democracy with a free press. It’s not as if they have complete control over the media. After all, the media can only toe the line to a certain extent, only to the point where their credibility is not completely destroyed” (Journalist, personal communication, November 23, 2015). Another interviewee points out that “the media today is so huge, inchoate and diverse that it has become harder to subordinate it” (Journalist, personal communication, November 22, 2015).
Democracy and its logic places safeguards that kick in at various historical junctures preventing the journalistic field from collapsing in the field of power. In-built institutional mechanisms such as the CAG, tasked with scrutinizing the workings of the government, were able to highlight state-Reliance collusion. The hitherto silent media leveraged the CAG’s harsh indictment of both the government and Reliance, to highlight the systemic corruption exposed by the issue of gas pricing in the public domain. State power in India is much more fragmented and checked by democratic forces (Kohli, 2007). Thus, democratic institutions create those interstices when the state is not entirely allied with business.

Once the initial outrage and headlines generated by the CAG report subsided, the follow up of this unfolding story was uneven with the mainstream press choosing to bury it in the inside pages. One of India’s foremost business journalists Sucheta Dalal identifies a pattern to Reliance’s reportage which she describes as ‘hit and run’ journalism whereby stories on Reliance are rarely followed up (Dalal, personal communication, November 28, 2015). This is indicative of the trouble journalists could find themselves in by persisting in reporting critically about the business group. It alludes to the creative strategies of resistance journalists resort to in restricted environments.

A television journalist found most of his stories on the issue being broadcast in one or two afternoons in very abridged versions or VO/VTs in television news parlance (Journalist, personal communication, December 7, 2015). A journalist based in Delhi employed by India’s biggest financial daily stated, “Any story I did on the Ambanis would either be buried deep inside the newspaper or killed without a reason. Even if they used the story, there was always intellectual dishonesty at play whereby the editor would either give a misleading headline or change the words in an attempt to dilute the story. Sometimes, I’d get a reason like such and such editor knows Mukesh Ambani personally so can you go a little soft on this or we are a business paper we can’t lose access to the finance minister” (Journalist, personal communication, November 24, 2015). It was common knowledge that the country’s finance minister
was a personal friend of the Ambanis as was the minister in charge of the oil and gas portfolio (Nayar, 2012).

Resurgent opposition parties who routinely attacked the government on several fronts such as rising prices and slowing growth yet remained unusually taciturn on its preferential treatment of Reliance. Elections were around the corner and it was evident that none of the major political parties wanted to antagonize a company that was a sizable contributor to political parties (Raman & Gahilote, 2013).

Although dismantling the ‘license-quota Raj’ (Pendakur, 2013) synonymous with corrupt state power introduced competition, this case study illuminates a greater convergence of the political and economic interests, solidifying subordination of the media further.

**Point of Rupture – The Rise of Popular Mobilization**

However, there were winds of change sweeping through the political sphere in India as the entrenched nexus between political parties and corporate houses to favor a few came into sharp relief through one corruption scam after another after 2010. India’s slowing economic growth contributed to mobilizing support for a movement that called itself India Against Corruption (IAC) eliciting a groundswell of support, resonating with simmering public anger and resentment at rising prices. This took the form of popular mobilization in the national capital against pervasive venality in government which the press could not afford to ignore. The news genre under tremendous revenue stress (Rodrigues, 2015, p. 165) gave “blanket coverage” to this ‘middle class movement’ as viewership of news channels rose by 40 percent in those two weeks indicating tremendous popular interest in the story (Raman, 2011). Television channels fed off the spectacle of burgeoning protests in turn contributing to enlarging the mobilization.

An offspring of this movement was the fledgling political party, the common man’s party or the AamAadmi Party (AAP), whose rapid popularity in the national capital had taken the political establishment by surprise. AAP set itself up as the “outsider” crusading against “unscrupulous politics of stealth and loot” (Udupa, 2014, p. 13). Its
leader, Arvind Kejriwal, made stinging personal attacks against the country’s richest man, Mukesh Ambani (Denyer, 2012). AAP was able to be fiercely critical of big business by breaking political parties’ dependence on big business. They raised their election funds transparently through donations from middle class citizens and overseas Indians (Bagri, 2014).

Kejriwal made an impressive electoral debut in Delhi enabled by proliferation of the social media in urban India, startling the political establishment (Udupa S., 2015). Regionalization of politics (AAP’s popularity was confined largely to the state of Delhi) is a direct result of the decline of national political parties. One of his government’s first steps was to take legal action against the mighty Reliance for their unbridled avarice in the gas pricing scandal. Kejriwal launched an investigation into the collusion between Reliance and the central government to create artificial scarcity of natural gas in the KG basin which was used as grounds to increase the price of gas resulting in far greater profits for the conglomerate (Kausar, 2014).

These radical tactics including launching an investigation into the gas pricing scam ensured the issue remained in the public eye. The arriviste leader articulated the populist anti-elitist sentiment, dictating the political agenda, forcing the press to give up its reticence on Reliance and provide him a platform. A television reporter describes his tactics as radical since no one had ever had the audacity to target the country’s richest man Mukesh Ambani personally in this way before even if they had had the courage to be critical of the company (Journalist, personal communication, November 30, 2015). Kejriwal was articulating public anger at the flagrant corruption in the manipulation of the price of gas which would have implications for the prices of most commodities of daily use. This burnished his credentials as the honest crusader challenging legacy parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and crony capitalism (Udupa, 2014, p. 13). Thus, political variables like electoral competition and new entrants in the political field led to a disjuncture between the political and economic fields. It symbolized the tension that exists between capital accumulation and the politics of democracy.
Facing a barrage of critical coverage, Reliance served legal notices to all those news channels that broadcast Kejriwal’s press conference where he made allegations against Mukesh Ambani. Legal notices alleging defamation were a well-tested strategy by Reliance to intimidate the press. One of the editors of a television channel confessed they had broadcast Kejriwal’s press conference live because they were expecting him to resign not anticipating his personal attack against Mukesh Ambani (Journalist, personal communication, December 5, 2015). In other words, they may well have self-censored or selectively edited his press conference if they had prior information Kejriwal would target Mukesh Ambani and Reliance.

The head of TV18’s news channel interference by Reliance in editorial processes started around the end of 2012-2013. “When Kejriwal comes out and targets Reliance directly in a presser on the oil issue. Then suddenly we started discussions for the first time should we cover Arvind live? Should we carry his press conference live? We had never heard this earlier.” (Journalist, personal communication, May 21, 2015) At the time, Reliance had kept its investment in Network18, the country’s biggest media organization, concealed from the public domain.

These unprecedented personal accusations on national television against Reliance and its owner Mukesh Ambani seem to have rattled India’s richest man and catalyzed Reliance’s decision to intervene directly to try and get a degree of control over public discourse which seemed to be spiraling out of Reliance’s control (Thakurta P., 2014). Reliance had largely stayed away from media ownership with one brief exception until now which had ended in failure. This changed in 2009. They acquired Network18 through surrogate companies clearly keen to downplay the acquisition. The takeover was ostensibly to procure content for Reliance’s mobile phone services (Mehta, 2015). Although Reliance’s financial involvement put it in a gatekeeping position, they were keen emphasize Bahl retained editorial control (Bhatia, 2013). RIL’s media release stated: "…Bahl and his team will continue to have full operational and management control of both the companies…Bahl and the current promoter entities of Network18 and TV18 will continue to retain control over Network18 and TV18…"
However, Reliance management had made numerous overt censorial interventions even before they took over direct formal control of Network18. A senior editor at one of the many Network18 ventures described them to this researcher. The time when his publication did a damaging expose on Reliance’s attempts to pressurize one of the foremost regulatory financial institutions, Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) that was investigating its business practices, Bahl received a call from the country’s finance minister, known to be a close friend of the Ambanis, ordering him to withdraw the story. “Bahl stopped us from carrying a story that had gone to bed!” (Journalist, Personal Communication, May 2, 2015). The story was pulled at the last minute even though they did not have an appropriate alternative for it.

This underscores the deep links between politics and business in India’s crony capitalist polity where private capital has held sway over the allocation of government portfolios and policy. Dhirubhai Ambani and Indira Gandhi’s personal relationship was an open secret in the 1980s. Reliance is seen as a pioneer in lobbying or cultivating an “industry of influence among politicians, bureaucrats and journalists” and bending rules in its favor (Kaushik, 2016).

Broadly, Bourdieu’s insight that most of the time economic and political fields are intertwined in such a manner that it is hard to analytically distinguish the impact they have separately especially in crony capital societies like India seems largely to be borne out by the evidence in this case study. The state almost always seeks to augment market power particularly in a case like India. Despite a neoliberal turn, the government remained large to serve corporate interests better (McChesney, 2001). And yet, disruption in the heteronomy exerted over the journalistic field cannot be understood without unravelling the political and economic. Fragmented state power, democratic institutions and electoral politics combine in unpredictable ways to induce cross-cutting institutional pressures. Thus, it is understanding ways in which macro political and economic interests diverge, as argued by new institutionalists, that is critical to understanding transformations in the journalistic field in the Indian context.
Journalists working in Network18 got to know about Reliance’s stake in their company’s ownership years after the transaction. It was then that Bahl’s vulnerability to the pressures exerted by Reliance made sense. “A few months later, there was a one on one meeting with all the senior editors. The single point agenda of those meetings was can we relook at our coverage of the media, can we also look at our coverage of Reliance” (Journalist, Personal Communication, May 2, 2015).

When it was taken over, Network18 was the country’s third biggest publicly listed media conglomerate with 27 national and regional television channels with a market valuation of 1.1 billion US dollars (Bhatia, 2013). It was one of the biggest success stories of liberalization of the media sector established by entrepreneur Raghav Bahl who started off with one profitable business channel reporting on stock market trading and corporate bosses. Having expanded at a furious pace, his company was, like many other media companies, enormously in debt. A former editor of Forbes India, one of the many ventures started by Network18 explains how the strain on the media business model enabled Reliance’s entry into Network18. “Post the 2007 worldwide recession, their market value crashed. Share price started declining because of a meltdown in the market and suddenly you were left with a large amount of debt” (Journalist, personal communication, May 2, 2015). Network18 had accrued debts of 1400 crore rupees [200 million US dollars] and the company was not an exception.

Network18 exemplifies the co constitutive nature of media expansion and economic reforms since 1991. One of its earliest employees explains the guiding philosophy that suffused their work – celebratory business journalism. Long stifled by bureaucracy and regulation, liberalization of the Indian economy was perceived as a panacea of all problems. “Raghav (Bahl) believed in free markets and so did most of us. No one told us not to do critical stories but there are non-verbal cues. People internalize. You want to be the first with the news like quarterly figures of companies so you don’t want to antagonize the PR guys. Also, you see your boss socializing with the bosses of the companies you are covering. It is all very cosy. Then you need these bosses to show up as guests in your shows or at events the
channel hosts so you don’t want to be critical. Raghav would encourage us to make use of companies’ hospitality like going on corporate junkets etc.” (Journalist, personal communication, June 14, 2015). All of these factors contributed to building an implicit understanding of turning an uncritical eye at the corporate sector and its underpinnings.

Privatization of the broadcasting sector resulted in exponential growth of television channels that tended to be cheerleaders of free markets (Rodrigues, 2015). Privatization led to an unbridled pursuit of profits which in turn resulted in an urban and soft news focus in tune with the audience advertisers sought (Hamilton, 2003; Baker E. C., 2007). Ever increasing competition for readers and viewers has resulted in a “war of tight ratings and circulation numbers” fostering extreme “entertainmentalization of news” (Rodrigues, 2010, p. 23; Saeed, 2009; Thussu, 2010).

An investigative reporter employed at one of the elite organs of the news media explained that the underlying reasons for many of his stories not being published would be the following:

“They tell us go easy on the three D’s – Death, Disease and Destruction. Cut down on negative news, do something that will make them (readers and viewers) feel cheerful” (Journalist, personal communication, December 14, 2015). Thus, the focus was creating an advertising friendly context for news.

The English language news media has led the race toward commercialization (Rao U. , 2013), and Bennett, Coleman & Company, Ltd., India’s most profitable media conglomerate has led the charge (Auletta, 2012). They own the world’s most widely circulated English language newspaper The Times of India (TOI) that institutionalized the practice of ‘paid news’. This flagrantly flouted the boundary between advertising and editorial content. This practice entails “friendly” coverage of companies that had entered into contracts with TOI making it one of the most profitable companies in the media sector (Thakurta & Reddy, 2010). Thus, the market leader has already put tremendous pressure on the news model.
However, the worldwide financial recession of 2007-2008 brought an abrupt halt to the furious expansion of the media sector particularly television. This expansion, partially fueled by a concomitant growth in the advertising industry shrank abruptly post-recession (Athique, 2012). Several media businesses including Network18 found themselves in dire financial trouble. Network18’s owner turned to India’s richest man Mukesh Ambani to rescue his network. Ambani obliged.

Reliance may have stayed behind the scenes but for fledgling political party AAP that was gaining popularity by highlighting pervasive corruption and crony capitalism. The party raised the government and Reliance nexus in the gas pricing issue as an egregious example of crony capitalism. Soon, AAP leader Kejriwal was dictating the political narrative commanding enormous popular urban support. His personal appeal and honest image had won him many supporters amongst the influential national editors and television reporters who were integral to the sympathetic coverage he was getting (Dalal, 2014). His sustained attack on Reliance including personal attacks on Mukesh Ambani in the run up to the 2014 national elections enraged the conglomerate. Reliance management ordered Network18 to “boycott” leaders of AAP (Raman, 2014). With election campaigning in full swing, Network18’s news channel CNN IBN downplayed AAP but found it hard to ignore the party altogether given its popularity.

Finally, broadcasting Kejriwal’s interview, albeit diluted, by Network18’s news channel seems to have been a decisive moment. To Reliance, this appeared an unpardonable transgression by a network whose purse strings they held (Raman, 2014). At around the same time, another Network18 venture, Forbes India published an article on how Mukesh Ambani had used his clout for his children’s admission to prestigious American universities.

“A story we had carried in our third or fourth issue about how Ambani got admission for his kids to business schools, how he wined and dined the whole entourage from Yale including the dean. All hell broke loose when we carried that. I got a call from Raghav on a Saturday saying how dare you carry a story on the children. I said this is not about the children, it is about the choices India’s richest man makes. He said, no,
I don’t agree, my wife doesn’t agree. I said he is a public persona and his choices will be up for scrutiny” (Journalist, personal communication, May 2, 2015).

Meanwhile, Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, a journalist not affiliated to any mainstream media house wrote and published a book on the irregularities in the pricing of gas and petroleum driven by Reliance with lengthy interviews with bureaucrats who had inside information. He launched his book at around the same time as AAP was raising the issue. He recounts how almost every news organization came to cover the launch of the book in Delhi but there was a complete absence of any news report on the book the next day (Thakurta, personal communication, August 21, 2015). Reliance had already sent legal notices to steer clear of reportage on the book titled Gas Wars to all the news organizations.

It was an unusual time for Mukesh Ambani and his company RIL with no slowdown in the bad news dribbling out for India’s largest corporate group (Dalal, 2014). Unused to relentless opprobrium, Mukesh Ambani is believed to have ordered drastic measures (Mishra, 2014). Reliance felt nothing short of direct editorial and managerial control of Network18 would counter the relentless slew of allegations raised by AAP. Soon after, they acquired complete control of the conglomerate for 2.5 billion US dollars, in the biggest takeover in Indian media’s history (Mishra, 2014). The formal and full takeover just a few weeks after the 2014 general elections resulted in Network18 becoming a bigger media conglomerate than the Bennett and Coleman or Times group and the Star group owned by media baron Rupert Murdoch (Thakurta P., 2014).

Reliance had always exerted strong control over media coverage of itself and the Ambani family even without direct ownership of the news media. A few exceptions aside, the news media has tread softly in its coverage of Reliance including eliding Reliance’s role in perpetrating one of the country’s largest corruption scams, the gas pricing’ scandal. It seemed to Reliance that AAP’s aggressive anti-crony capital popular mobilization was shaped and amplified by the news media particularly television. No longer was their economic and political muscle sufficient to shield Reliance from the glare of scrutiny. This sustained criticism seems to have catalyzed
Ambanis direct intervention in the media business acquiring India’s biggest media house.

Economic determinism does not entirely explain the developments and Reliance’s slipping control without an internal reading of the journalistic field and understanding of institutionalization of the field. The analysis remains partial without unpacking the internal dynamics of the journalistic field.

Interviews indicate news network CNN IBN found it impossible to censor Kejriwal entirely even in the face of explicit orders by the network’s corporate bosses who were in the direct line of Kejriwal’s fire. It is evident that Reliance already had a controlling stake in Network18 and expected the network to black out Kejriwal and yet senior editors resisted those orders partly out of professional self-conception and partly out of fear of losing viewership in a competitive market. The editor of Forbes in India, part of the Network18 conglomerate, explains the strong newsroom culture he had created where “they didn’t brook any kind of interference, carried strong stories throughout, work was above reproach, if you had made a mistake, sure we should correct it. Newsroom is not meant to take care of the sensitivities of the people. Then we would never end up publishing anything” (Journalist, personal communication, May 2, 2015). This clearly did not extend to the entire conglomerate but a professional culture flowed from individual journalists in leadership positions who had built a reputation of integrity and independence. It is important to tease out diverse norms and practices in the journalistic field to understand the clash between economic constraints and professional resistance which is an important part of field theory (Benson, 2010). Media logic is economic and political; it is also “professional” (Hallin, 1996).

Broadcasting reforms and the growth of 24-hour news channels has created a complex and contradictory set of professional practices and news content (Chadha & Koliska, 2016). While heteronomous pressures have led to weakly institutionalized professional values, Rao argues that the competitive media landscape does highlight political corruption and “give voice to the voiceless and to seek accountability from the police and political actors” (Rao S. , 2008, p. 204). This combines with notions
of a watchdog role imbibed from the liberal democratic model of the press (Rao S., 2008; Thussu, 2010).

Mehta asserts that television has become one of the many intersecting vectors in India’s political matrix contributing to political participation (Mehta, 2008). Inherent logic of the medium enabled prominence of the feud within the Ambani family and popular political mobilization against crony capitalism. The latter metamorphosed into a political movement led by AAP that transformed the political field. AAP challenged the entrenched economic and political elite particularly Reliance who forbade the coverage of AAP’s leader Kejriwal on the channel they effectively owned.

Yet news channel CNN IBN owned by Network18 found itself compelled to disobey Reliance’s diktat and broadcast an interview with Mukesh Ambani’s bete noire, Kejriwal. Concomitantly, the intrepid editor of Forbes, published unflattering personal details about Mukesh Ambani’s children and their admission in American universities. Cumulatively, they symbolize the persistent tension between intrusions from the field of power and the institutionalization, albeit weak, of normative journalistic ideals of independence.

Bourdieu’s conception of doxa or implicit rules shared by practitioners constitutive of a field both enable and constrain journalistic practice. The Indian case provides evidence of journalistic doxa of a democratic watchdog role of the press although intrusions by economic and political forces historically has resulted in weak institutionalization of these journalistic values. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing tension between institutionalization of democratic journalistic values and instrumentalization of the press manifest in independent online journalism on the margins keeping these issues from disappearing into a black hole.

With India's biggest corporate conglomerate also India's biggest media company, fears of the risk of undemocratic dominance of the public sphere strengthened (Baker C. E., 2007). This has been compounded by reports that Reliance’s stake overtly or covertly extends to five other media companies. With the Ambanis publicly switching their long-term allegiance from the Congress party to the right-wing
nationalist political party, the BJP, Reliance’s takeover of Network18 is also implicated in the news media’s partisan coverage of the BJP leader Narendra Modi in the 2014 elections.

Concomitantly, there has been a noticeable shrinking of ideological diversity as is apparent from electoral marginalization of left parties all over the country. This has coincided with the rise of the right culminating in the election of right-wing Hindu nationalist leader Narendra Modi. This was reflected and amplified by a corporate media leading to concerns that he had won with the help of neo liberal media (Rao & Mudgal, 2015).
Chapter 8

Discussion – Contingent Heteronomy

This research attempts to illuminate journalistic practice and the factors that influence it, at the intersection of political and economic interests in a crony capitalist polity. More broadly, it attempts to contribute to an understanding of the interrelationships between the journalistic field and the ruling class, as a consequence of neoliberal reforms in the world’s largest democracy.

There are some overarching themes that appear to be common to all three case studies suggestive of the role journalism plays in democratization, its interrelationships with the other structures and institutions of the polity and the factors that influence it.

**Strong Heteronomous Pressures**

Broadly, the evidence suggests that the journalistic field is subject to strong heteronomous pressures from intersecting political and economic fields. In the decades before liberalization, powerful politicians and bureaucrats had extraordinary discretionary powers in the ‘license raj’. This fostered a climate where capitalists developed an unholy nexus with grasping politicians and bureaucrats (Ganguly, 2012). The interpenetration of the economic and economic fields has been entrenched and enduring. The political elite and capitalists have played a significant role in shaping the democratic structure (Kohli, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the era of a dirigiste state is over and there has been a profound shift in balance of power towards business and away from the state but the state still retains significant control over national resources (Bardhan, 2001; Murali, 2019). Business has increased its power in the polity and gained much greater ideological legitimacy since economic liberalization in large measure due to the enabling influence of the deregulated media. This is not to discount moments of mutual hostility and internal divisions between state and capital in what has otherwise been described as a
cohesive coalition. Overall, political scientists have observed that the state’s alliance with business, already strong before economic restructuring, has grown stronger.

Historically, media ownership has been in the hands of family run businesses who could not afford to antagonize the political parties in government to protect their varied business interests. Besides, an advertising dependent business model ensured a largely compliant media. Rao argues that the state’s diminished role in the polity has implied that it is no longer an important advertiser and financier for the media. This has resulted in the media receding dependence on the state and seeking greater accountability from political actors (Rao U., 2010). However, this research demonstrates that certain dominant members of the political elite are exempt from questioning and afforded deference as the case study on the Gandhi family and Narendra Modi indicates.

The dominance of the dominant elite has not been entirely unchallenged either but the ruling class has played a significant role in constraining institutions that may seek accountability from the powerful to grow strong (Kohli, 2001). Thus, the regulatory environment is far from robust leaving journalists to the whims of owners, vulnerable to threats of legal action by powerful individuals, resulting in a highly uncertain media environment for journalists. The uncertainty principle underscored by new institutionalists has led to general precaution in reporting on the political and business elite historically. As the three case studies indicate, journalists censored themselves when it came to covering the dominant business and political elite in spite of the evident newsworthiness of and public interest in the stories they were suppressing.

Thus, the default setting seems to be that of subservience and heteronomy in the relationship with the political or economic elite. This is even more pronounced when political and economic interests converge, a salient feature of a crony capitalist structure. This needs to be qualified by saying that the ruling elite has not always been cohesive with divisions arising from competition for state-controlled resources and subsidies, but the broader picture is one of an underlying unity (Chibber & Usmani, 2013).
It would seem the convergence of interests of the economic and political fields emaciates journalistic autonomy. The external pressures are such that the journalistic field collapses in the overlapping political and economic fields or the field of power. This has meant that entrenched pressures have been internalized over time and become constitutive of journalistic practice as we have seen in all three cases. The result is extensive self-censorship to preempt threats like those of legal action or withdrawal of advertisements or worse, losing one’s job. This was evident in the run up to the election of Narendra Modi. The growth of the power of private capital in the Indian economy was evident in the openly partisan way in which the business community supported Modi’s candidature as Prime Minister (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). This resulted in significant pressure on the mainstream media to endorse and publicize Modi as the only credible contender for the position of Prime Minister in the 2014 elections as private capital saw Modi as a proponent of business. Any scrutiny or unfavorable questioning invited immediate dismissals of senior journalists and editors. The result was an outright flattering and promotional tone adopted in favor of Modi and the BJP across the breadth of the mainstream national news media.

The other example is most mainstream news media houses did not publish the Nira Radia transcripts even though they were in the public domain and evinced significant public interest. These conversations proved the proximity of state and capital. They showed powerful interests, including some of the country’s richest business houses, in a bad light. The conversations exposed the mechanisms by which business exercises its power in the polity and seeks to strengthen it with the state’s collusion. This was incontrovertible evidence of subversion of democracy at the highest level. The interests of the political and economic elite were aligned in circumventing the circulation of these conversations. Thus, it was no surprise then that there was implicit fear in the news media of publishing the tapes. The publications that went against this orthodoxy and broke this silence paid a heavy price. They faced legal action, withdrawal of advertisements in addition to their editors losing their jobs. Fearing exactly this kind of retribution over the years, the news media has internalized censorship staying off certain powerful individuals and businesses.
As a result, this research suggests that field theory needs to be reassessed in contexts outside of the West where journalism as an institution hasn’t been able to build clear field boundaries. Whether journalism develops as an institution with clear boundaries, distinct from other institutions in a democratic polity depends on the institutional architecture of that polity. In a crony capitalist democracy like India, the boundaries demarcating it from other institutions never fully developed because of the structural pressures and regular transgressions by the ruling elite. It was not in their interest that journalism develops as a field or an institution with a degree of autonomy as the scrutiny that would invite, would expose their subversion of democratic practices for their own enrichment. Arguably, the press in India has never, barring exceptions like the Bofors scandal, seriously challenged the hegemonic elite. I would argue that field theory’s attribution of a certain degree of autonomy to fields, weak though it might be, may not be applicable to all contexts. Bourdieu has conceptualized fields with some degree of autonomy where a field “obeys its own laws, its own nomos” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 33). When confronted with an alignment of the interests of the political and economic elite, the field does become reducible to external pressures. Thus, we need to heed Scott’s suggestion to treat institutionalization as an ‘empirical question’ (Scott, 2014, p. 187). This implies the need to empirically investigate how institutionalized the social formation of journalism is in a particular context and not assume a state of institutionalization.

This analysis seeks to address RQ1 which asks how the state and market shape the field of journalism in the Indian context. They exert strong heteronomous pressures on the field of journalism, particularly when the interests of the political and economic fields are aligned. The implications are that the field of journalism collapses in the field of power, losing its independence altogether.

However, the state’s neoliberal shift in 1991 unleashed subterranean forces that combine and cross-cut in complex and unpredictable ways.
Role of the News Media in Democratization Processes in Neoliberal India

Amidst underlying continuity, there were profound changes in the role the field of journalism plays in democratization processes in Indian polity. Strong heteronomous pressures suggest a compliant press historically, thus, I am not making the argument that there were fewer restrictions on the news media before liberalization. However, what this evidence suggests is there has been a dramatic transformation in the role of the press in the transformed institutional set up and consequently, the nature of constraints on it.

Unpacking the Nira Radia case study indicates that it plays a far more pernicious role than mere subordination to the fields of power. The journalistic field is not merely embedded in the overlapping political and economic fields. Situated as it is in an intermediate position between the economic and political fields with access and strong linkages to both, this research contends it enables the consolidation of crony capitalism in the polity.

An examination of the deeper structural shift due to the economic restructuring illuminates the transformation in the political role of the media after reconfiguration of the polity in 1991. It has come to play a pivotal role in the political processes of the country. Liberalization has, arguably, displaced the state from its commanding heights of directing the course of the economy. The balance of power between the political and economic sections of the ruling class has altered but the political elite is still in a position to distribute largesse to private capital. Chandra argues that the patronage-based relations between the state and reconstituted private sector are intact although there has been a relocation of the patronage (Chandra, 2015). The state can distribute resources at its discretion in the course of whole-sale privatization of various sectors hitherto controlled by the state, undertaken since liberalization. This was the case in the government’s privatization of the telecommunication sector in 2008 where the telecommunications minister handed over telecommunication licenses, state owned resources, to private telecommunication companies resulting in a loss of an estimated 40 billion dollars to the country if it had not been contested (Pendakur, 2013). The highest court of the country struck these down calling them
illegal and reprimanded the state for acting as a broker to capital (Pendakur, 2013). These were the negotiations being brokered that the Nira Radia conversations exposed.

While the state and capital nexus has grown stronger after economic liberalization, paradoxically, there has also been greater fragmentation of the dominant coalition of the political and economic elite. Liberalization has resulted in increased competition within the economic field and democratization processes have led to the entry of newer political agents and greater grassroots political empowerment. There is no doubt though that deregulation has led to a reduction in regulations and discretionary power held by the bureaucracy (Ganguly, 2012). Although transparent legal frameworks are yet to take hold and be put in place, entrepreneurs are not restricted by labyrinthine regulations and requiring permissions from bureaucrats. Liberalization has unleashed the entrepreneurial energy that was being stifled by controls put in place by a gargantuan bureaucracy under the central planning regime. There has been a fragmentation in the coalition of dominant business groups with the rise of medium and smaller regional business houses (Bardhan, 2001). The reconstituted private sector has also resulted in a measure of economic renewal. As a result, power conflicts over the allocation of state’s resources have grown (Kohli, 2001).

Additionally, growing democratization of traditional power relations in an electoral democracy has mobilized a variety of previously disempowered groups (Bardhan, 2001). A mobilized electoral democratic structure like India where there is a degree of political and social renewal has led to some amount of fragmentation of the hitherto largely cohesive power structure. Varshney has made a forceful argument about how India’s democracy is not merely a procedural republic (Varshney, 2000). Democracy has challenged traditional forms of clientelistic politics and brought about socioeconomic empowerment of the subaltern (Varshney, 2000). The narrow and cohesive elite that has dominated the Indian polity, has naturally been challenged. This has meant that political empowerment afforded by the democratic polity has come in conflict with the hegemony of the ruling elite which in turn has implications
for the alliance of political and economic elite that has dominated the Indian polity. Political and economic renewal threatens the entrenched interests of the hegemonic elite and needs to be shored up.

Political scientist Atul Kohli argues the ruling elite has needed to put in greater effort to protect its interests and consolidate its hegemony (Kohli, 2006). One needs to qualify these statements by adding that the ruling elite has not been monolithic. There have been instances of internal divisions between the cohesive elite historically but they have faced greater challenges to their incestuous accumulation from subaltern mobilization brought about by deepening democratization (Nayyar, 2001) and proliferating competition within business. Continuity in entrenched interests should not be underestimated but the alliance of political and economic elite has needed greater negotiation and maintenance (Nayyar, 2001).

How do these structural changes relate to transforming the field of journalism?

The analysis suggests there has been a modification in the political role played by the media post liberalization, a marginal player before that (Rajagopal, 2016). Scholars have noted the seismic changes in the media landscape in terms of reach, pervasiveness and influence (Ninan, 2007; Mehta, 2015; Athique; Rodrigues & Ranganathan, 2010). Mehta observes that few industries post-liberalization have offered “physical proximity to the traditional sources of power, as many possibilities, at least of peddling influence and a greater optical illusion of being a key gatekeeper and weathervane of the public discourse as news television” (Mehta N. , 2015, p. 25). There is no doubt that the media, particularly television news, created a new public discourse after deregulation of the media industry giving voice to the aspiring middle class and appearing to seek political accountability (Ninan, 2007). It altered the notion of popular participation both for the middle class and rural newly literate population nourished by the greater flow of information.

The growth of the news media – increased economic heft after liberalization, newer technologies like television and the internet, their pervasive presence and rapid penetration peddling newer modes of social aspiration – has made them central to political processes in the country. Chakravartty and Roy (2015) argue that it is not
merely the media’s increased presence and expenditure that makes them significant to the country’s political processes but the introduction of new distinctive logics, forms and modes by the media that need to be taken into account. The television-driven and personality-centered campaign in the “mediated elections” of 2014 provided ample proof of the media’s role in changing perceptions of Modi and engineering a discursive shift in political narrative such that his being the only credible political alternative was rendered common sense (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Rajagopal A., 2014; Sinha, 2017).

Additionally, corporatization and foreign investment, greater profit orientation, a fast-growing advertising industry has also meant that the media have deep linkages with the market. Funds have flowed into the news media through a combination of corporate and ‘gray’ capital with myriad forms of ownership linked to formal and informal politics (Parthasarthi, 2011). As a direct beneficiary of deregulation of the communication industry, there is scholarship that underscores its role in enabling a cultural context where the expansion in the role of private capital seemed natural and inevitable. Thus, the media has strong interrelationships with both the market and the state.

Pervasive presence and perceived influence in cultural and political processes has lent it growing symbolic capital. Here, the Gramscian conceptualization of the media as ideological apparatuses for the state and capital alone does not account for their centrality in political processes in a democracy. The conceptualization of the media’s symbolic power to not only shape but almost define reality enhances our understanding of its role and power to impact all other social spaces (Couldry, 2003, p. 669). It has the power of consecration and codetermining the amount of capital possessed rather than channeling information alone (Udupa, 2012). Media practices are implicated in the creation and fashioning of “publics” at times by ‘othering’ certain social groups (Rajagopal, 2001; Udupa, 2015). Thus, it has come to occupy a pivotal position in the transformed structure of power and the web of institutions in society shaping and embodying aspiration, political participation and cultures. This symbolic capital draws on and enables journalists’ access to sources of power.
The news media with its symbolic capital, situated between politics and capital that allows it to traverse both fields with ease and familiarity becomes an ideal agent for both. The elite employ the field of journalism that occupies a unique intermediate position, to stitch up and consolidate their alliance which is confronted with greater challenges due to deepening democratization. The coalition of dominant interests needs continual renewal and negotiation with the rise of competition and challenges to its dominance (Kohli, 2001). This is where the news media plays an insidious role in institutionalizing, upholding and consolidating the “narrow alliance of the ruling elite on which the Indian polity rests” (Kohli, 2007, p. 112). Instead of keeping a distance and holding the ruling class accountable, journalism is pressed into the service of buttressing the interests of the ruling elite in a crony capitalist polity.

This was pronounced in the Nira Radia case study which illuminates how journalists use their access and proximity to both the economic and political fields to act as messengers or brokers to negotiate deals between the two. Journalists have access to the ruling elite in their role of news gatherers and disseminators. They employ this position to act as a go-between the state and capital as was evident in the Nira Radia case and become mediators in capital’s negotiations with the state over the resources controlled by the government. Besides this, the news media also has the power to shape and legitimize the distribution of power which places them in an important position in the power structure. The Nira Radia conversations showed the mechanisms at work as business grows its imprint and control over the polity in close alliance with the state. The shift in distribution of power and capital’s enhanced role in collusion with the state need legitimacy in a democracy as political parties need to win elections. Not only does the media, a pliable intermediate institution, help stitch up the alliance of the economic and political elite, it also lends legitimacy to this nexus.

The inference that can be drawn is that the news media were employed by the dominant elite to negotiate and stitch up the interests of a dominant coalition of interests. Additionally, they help obscure and legitimize the shift in balance of power between state and capital in neoliberal India.
Thus, this thesis finds the news media deeply implicated in the neoliberal project. It is not merely embedded in the field of power, it plays an actively anti-democratic role by enabling crony capitalism instead of helping democratize power relations.

**Access Journalism**

The trope of access in the data collected alludes to the instrumentalization of the press, often by capitalists, competing for state-controlled resources. Paradoxically, instrumentalization deploys the symbolic power of the media that inheres in the journalistic field. The exposure of this widespread complicity of the journalistic field with the structures of power, of being one of them, is a key reason media owners and editors are not keen to turn the spotlight inwards. Broadly, the media plays a salient role in augmenting the patterns of structurally maintained power of the elites. Intensifying commercial interests has led to commandeering of the journalistic field to negotiate political and economic alignments in a mobilized democracy in the project of consolidating the narrow alliance of the political and economic elite on which the India polity rests. This is not surprising in a democratic structure that has, by and large, served the interests of the powerful in society, accommodating the demands of weaker groups only when pressed to (Kohli, 2001). Thus, this analysis provides answers to RQ 1a on how the neoliberal turn of the polity has transformed the role the journalistic field plays in democratization processes.

**Mitigating factors, Countervailing influences**

And yet, dismissing the media as subordinate to and instrumentalized by the powerful does not explain why and how the self-censorship was disrupted and the news media did, albeit in intermittent windows, enable democratic discourse. Understanding the disruption requires untangling the political and economic fields. Broadly, Bourdieu’s insight that most of the time economic and political fields are intertwined in such a manner that it is hard to analytically distinguish the impact they have especially in crony capital societies like India seems largely to be borne out by the evidence in these case studies. Chibber and Usmani make a persuasive case for the Indian state’s support for and proximity to its capitalist class even before
neoliberalization (Chibber & Usmani, 2013). In fact, economic reform in many ways was dictated by the agenda of domestic business interests (Kohli, 2006). After economic reform started, it was the government’s stated role to “facilitate and promote private investment” instead of regulating private capital and building a strong public sector (Chandrasekhar, 2014). The economy was thus reshaped to serve private capital. The government remained large, instead of receding, to serve corporate interests better (McChesney, 2001; Pendakur, 2013).

Hallin and Mancini famously said the press takes on the shape of the political system of the country. In other words, the political system and its variables mould and influence the journalistic field and vice versa. Macro level variables: political culture, the structure of society, the media and govt institutions, the norms governing the relationship between journalists and politics, regulatory practices, and the level of technological development of communications industry (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). They help to shape media messages as well as their patterns of circulation.

Structural features of the Indian polity provide clues to the role media plays in the processes of democratization in the Indian polity. Scholarship on the democratic trajectory of the Indian polity is divided. Most agree that democracy has struck deep roots in India. “Democracy which was provided largely from above is now being claimed increasingly from below by the people” (Nayyar, 2001, p. 389). Democratic practices such as adult franchise, expressing dissent and forming associations to demand their rights are exercised by most including weaker socio-economic groups resulting in a ‘million mutinies’ (Kohli, 2001). The polity has undoubtedly become more inclusive and representative (Varshney, 2000).

However, political empowerment cannot obscure how limited substantive benefits of democracy have been. Politics has been high on rhetoric than in practice. Many have criticized the state’s feeble capacity to undertake redistributive reforms and make a real dent in mass poverty (Kohli, 2006; Sen, 2009). Social and economic cleavages remain deep. Thus, economic empowerment has lagged behind political empowerment but instilled aspirations for a better life and opportunities.
Liberalization of the economy set India on the path of rapid economic growth but the benefits of that growth been distributed highly unevenly leading to widening wealth inequalities (Bardhan, 2001; Kohli, 2001). Economists studying global inequality find that “the incomes of those at the very top of the Indian population have grown at a faster pace than in China” but the poor remain poor in the last few decades (Rattanani & Pattnaik, 2017). It has led to an entrenchment of class power at the cost of social justice and equity (Pendakur, 2013). It has also fashioned a middle class that constitutes a robust public sphere fed on the combined diet of mediated consumerism and responsible citizenry (Udupa, 2015).

The benefits of neoliberal policies have accrued to a small minority but electoral democracy has led to a more equitable distribution of political rights and sense of empowerment. Varshney argues that the Indian democracy, evolving along lines distinct from the West, may not have reduced economic inequalities but it has had a real impact on social inequalities particularly in mobilizing social groups disrupting caste hierarchies (Varshney, 2000). Thus, there are contradictory processes at work - empowering political processes and growing economic inequality. This is what leads Nayyar to assert that “forces are moving the economy and polity, for the first time in independent India, in opposite directions” (Nayyar, 2001, p. 393). As a result, growing democratization and politicization of myriad groups in the lower strata of society is in constant tension with accelerating accumulation.

This has implications for the news media that occupies a central role in the institutional architecture of the polity. The media does not merely reflect these contradictory forces, it becomes a sight for contestation between these conflicting forces. The most egregious example of this is the gas pricing scandal involving Reliance in collusion with the state that represented illegitimate capital accumulation by the country’s richest conglomerate and fledgling political party AAP’s attempts to expose this instance of crony capitalism.

A democratic structure enabled the rise of an outsider like AAP’s leader Kejriwal who articulated public anger at the brazen subversion of democratic practices by the dominant elite. Leading a popular mobilization against corruption, his revelations
exposed the media’s complicity in crony capitalism. The political party AAP, profoundly transformed the political environment and culture. The popular mobilization resonated public anger at systemic corruption and a slowing economy. Concomitantly, the Congress led government was undermined by a slew of corruption scandals and weak leadership.

The news media had ignored the gas pricing scandal as they habitually turned a blind eye on big business but profound changes in the political environment made the media’s silence on many of the scandals like the gas pricing scandal untenable as the press risked losing both, audiences and credibility. The political force represented by Kejriwal compelled the complicit mainstream media to break ranks with the field of power. Thus, the potential of the political and economic being at odds in Bourdieu’s conception obscures the impulses that induce windows of autonomy for journalists.

Sustained critical scrutiny of Reliance’s business practices and the Ambani family, owners of Reliance, was only possible due to the role AAP played, reshaping political discourse. It was the consolidation of electoral democracy that made the rise of an outsider possible whose struggle for recognition situated his politics in opposition to legacy parties that were all complicit in venal politics. The need to control the political narrative impelled Reliance’s takeover of the country’s biggest media network after having vowed not to enter the media business. When they found that their indirect control over the news media proved insufficient to keep coverage of AAP out, they were forced to take direct control of the media network in an attempt to black out AAP and its success in highlighting how Reliance had been a key beneficiary of crony capitalism in the Indian democracy.

The divergence between the political and economic fields allowed the media a degree of independence to criticize the ruling elite and amplify the movement against corruption. The media contributed to changing the political environment. Although subject to strong heteronomous pressures, the media was compelled to reflect democratic dissent at the risk of losing legitimacy as demonstrated in these case studies. However, these periods of relative independence were short-lived before heteronomous pressures would stifle its independence again.
Thus, macro forces shaping journalism do not always converge. A divergence between macro forces result in intermittent windows of journalistic autonomy. This conflict arises from the participatory and inclusive nature of India’s mobilized democracy. A fragmentation of the power structure introduces conflict and competition which briefly reduces the heteronomous pressures on the field of journalism. There is greater proximity and interpenetration of interests since liberalization and yet paradoxically, there is a need to separate political influence from economic influence.

The case studies reveal the institutional conditions under which macro political and economic interests diverged. Dissensus among the elite, new entrants transforming the political culture and the monitorial regulatory institutions of a democratic state are among some of the external factors that led to a divergence between the interests of the political and economic elite. Examples of these instances are evident in the case studies. Herman and Chomsky’s contention that dissensus amongst the elite allows the media an opportunity to overcome constraints imposed by the political economy of the media held true in the instance of a feud between the Ambani brothers. This provided a rare window when the implicit understanding among journalists that reporting on Reliance is taboo broke down, allowing reportage on the feud with information being leaked by the two camps against each other.

Democracy and its logic place safeguards that kick in at various historical junctures preventing the journalistic field from collapsing in the field of power. Inbuilt institutional regulatory mechanisms such as the CAG, tasked with scrutinizing the workings of the government, were able to expose the state-capital nexus like collusion with Reliance. The hitherto silent media leveraged the CAG’s harsh indictment of both the government and Reliance, to highlight the systemic corruption exposed by the issue of gas pricing in the public domain. State power in India is much more fragmented and checked by democratic forces (Kohli, 2007). Thus, democratic institutions create those interstices when the state is not entirely allied with business.
Situated in its unique intermediate position between the economic and political fields, endowed with symbolic power, the media reflects, mediates and shapes these contradictory forces. Thus, this provides us answers to RQ1, RQ 1a and 1b – how do the state and market entangle to enfeeble journalistic autonomy, how has economic restructuring transformed pressures on the field of journalism, implications of that on the role it plays in democratization processes of the polity, when and how the economic and political fields diverge and the implications for the news media.

**Journalistic Autonomy**

Economic determinism does not explain disruption in the journalistic orthodoxy of staying off critical reportage of the hegemonic elite as is evident in all three case studies. Convergence of heteronomous pressures ensured compliance by the media with most of the national news media ignoring news stories and scandals of national import as is evident in all three case studies. Most journalists practiced self-censorship on these topics which were known to be off limits. And yet, journalistic processes cannot be understood entirely without unpacking the field of journalism. The Nira Radia case provides the most egregious example of journalistic agency. Actions of a handful of journalists lifted the lid on media’s self-censorship of a scandal that itself was scandalous.

Corporate media vulnerable to both political and commercial pressures threw a shroud of silence around the Nira Radia tapes and yet, two news magazines, *Open* and *Outlook*, both corporate owned defied the prevailing orthodoxy. This cannot be explained through media ownership patterns but only through the internal dynamics and positions of the actors in the field. Most established journalists and media houses with economic and cultural capital had aligned themselves with the political and economic elite, relinquishing their critical role. It is the newer entrants like *Open* and *Outlook* magazines in the field that took on the powerful interests represented in the Nira Radia tapes in what was a David versus Goliath encounter. *Outlook* magazine had accumulated considerable cultural capital through its adversarial and fearless journalistic work. This can partially be explained by its position in relation to the more central mainstream players in the field. For *Outlook*, a small publication on the
margins with little economic capital, the fastest way for it to get noticed in a crowded field was to do critical reportage in a field where most news organizations are compromised. Most bigger organizations with economic capital had too much to lose from threats of withdrawal of advertising and the tacit political loyalties they developed over time. In the struggle between economic gain and political legitimacy, bigger organizations choose economic gain as they have already accumulated political legitimacy (Ryfe, 2006). The newer agents are looking for political legitimacy and recognition. Outlook’s editor confessed to hesitating and deliberating over whether to go ahead or not fearing the consequences. It was when they got wind of Open magazine’s decision to go ahead and publish the transcripts of the tapes that they feared losing the cultural capital they had accumulated in the struggle for recognition in the field. Open magazine, a new entrant, also realized that the quickest way of making a mark in a crowded field would be take the risk of publishing the Nira Radia story. Thus, Bourdieu’s insight that new agents provide transformative force and competition in the struggle for recognition in the field contributes to explaining why they defied the prevailing orthodoxy.

Although both field and new institutional theory conceptualize social spheres as being at least partially autonomous from external pressures, new institutionalism lacks the conceptual tools to enable an analysis of the field’s internal dynamics. Field theory aids the understanding of resistance which can partly be understood from the internal logic of the journalistic field.

However, Bourdieu’s overreliance on economic determinism underestimates individual subversive acts (Rao U., 2010). Both the news magazines took on the most powerful interests in the country, largely due to the intrepid journalists in authoritative positions within these media organizations. Journalists at Open and Outlook employed stealth and cultural capital to successfully push the story through. Interviews with journalists in other media showed there were others who had similar intentions but could not act on it as they were not in positions sufficiently authoritative. They lacked the authority not the intentionality. Rao describes how journalistic activity involves navigating the complexity of “closeness to the powerful,
their desire to be critical and their dependence on private capital” (Rao U. , 2010, p. 714). Thus, journalistic doxa of holding the powerful accountable cohabits and collides with myriad pressures making journalistic practice fraught with contradictions.

Most journalists in the English media including the ones implicated by the Radia tapes and those who defied the silence, are members of dominant upper caste and class, educated in elite Western institutions professing to uphold the journalistic values. The ones who defied censorship were well-known for their uncompromising editorial independence which had often cost them their jobs and pushed them to culturally rich though economically marginal media houses. Bourdieu contends that accumulated cultural capital is a determinant of the agent’s subsequent trajectory.

Western conceptions of journalism’s watchdog role have informed journalistic practice in India. And yet, they have to temper and compromise their desire to be critical with their closeness to the powerful that is needed for access to news and news makers and also, the media’s dependence on advertising revenues make journalistic practice a complex exercise (Rao U. , 2010). Several journalists described the strategies they had had to develop to be able to practice their profession ethically and yet manage to survive the multiple pressures they face.

Internal dynamics had far reaching consequences in the Reliance case study. A few exceptions aside, the news media has tread softly in its coverage of Reliance including eliding Reliance’s role in perpetrating one of the country’s largest corruption scams. Reliance was one of the primary targets of AAP’s aggressive anti-crony capital popular mobilization. It appeared to Reliance that the news media particularly television shaped and amplified AAP’s censure. No longer was their economic and political muscle sufficient to shield Reliance from the glare of scrutiny. There seemed no other way of ending the sustained criticism they faced from AAP than direct intervention in the media business. This catalyzed the Ambanis’ decision to take direct control of India’s biggest media house weeks after the 2014 elections that swept Narendra Modi to power.
It is evident that Reliance already had a controlling stake in Network18 and expected
the network to black out AAP leader Kejriwal and yet, senior editors resisted those
orders partly out of professional self-conception and partly out of fear of losing
viewership in a competitive market. AAP was dictating the political discourse at the
time evoking substantial popular support particularly in the national capital of Delhi. 
Professional logic – the desire to be independent and critical and not lose to
competition in a crowded news market – did not allow editors and journalists in
Network18 to kowtow entirely to their new owners, Reliance. The clash between
economic constraints and professional resistance is an important part of field theory
(Benson, 2010). There were significant external pressures on the journalistic field
and yet the evidence suggests these were countered by some resistance from within
the journalistic field.

Broadcasting reforms and the growth of 24-hour news channels have created a
complex and contradictory set of professional practices and news content (Chadha &
Koliska, 2016). While heteronomous pressures have led to weakly institutionalized
professional values, Rao argues that the competitive media landscape does perform
its watchdog role and highlight political corruption and seek accountability on behalf
of the citizens (Rao, 2008). This is shaped by notions of an accountability role and
speaking truth to power imbibed from the liberal democratic model of the press. The
global spread of democratic values has been accompanied by the proliferation of
certain journalistic professional norms.

News channel CNN IBN owned by Network18 found itself compelled to disobey
Reliance’s diktat and broadcast an interview with Mukesh Ambani’s bete noire,
Arvind Kejriwal, defying express orders. Concomitantly, the intrepid editor of
another Network18 venture published unflattering personal details about Mukesh
Ambani’s children and their admission in American universities. Cumulatively, they
symbolize the persistent tension between intrusions from the field of power and the
institutionalization, albeit weak, of normative journalistic ideals of independence.
Reliance felt compelled to take over Network18 to bring the public discourse back in
its control, resulting in far reaching implications for the political economy of the Indian media.

**Ideology and Myths**

New institutional theory provides additional insight into the influences that enable and constrain journalistic practice by foregrounding the role myths, dogmas and prejudices play. They contribute to solidifying norms that structure human action and result in conformity among journalists (North, 1993). Teasing out the influence of ideology and myths and how they contributed to shaping journalistic practice in the Indian context and wholesale homogeneity in coverage of big businesses like Reliance.

Liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 after decades of stifling bureaucratic controls and severe restrictions on enterprise, cartels and monopolies in a socialist political economy (FICCI, 1999) led to an ebullience about the power of free markets. This resulted in an unquestioning and celebratory rather than a critical lens on neo-liberalism. As media industry was one of the biggest beneficiaries of deregulation and liberalization, there was little appetite for interrogating neoliberalism and journalists internalized the euphoric discourse around liberalization. This informed all news coverage, constraining news coverage of business particularly resulting in an ideological reorientation that legitimized the reforms.

Concomitantly, there has been a noticeable shrinking of ideological diversity as is apparent from electoral marginalization of left parties all over the country. This has coincided with the rise of the right culminating in the election of right-wing Hindu nationalist leader Narendra Modi. This was reflected and amplified by a corporate media leading to concerns that he had won with the help of neoliberal media (Rao & Mudgal, 2015). It is evident in the dominant values that the media increasingly foregrounds – private-sector led growth and nationalism that manifests in issues of national security (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019).

1. Doxa versus informal norms
It is clear from the interviews with journalists that there is a specific doxa or a system of presuppositions inherent in membership of this field of journalism (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 37) that is a shared notion of a profession that is supposed to hold the powerful to account and turn a critical eye on the powerful. This comes out quite clearly in all the interviews this researcher has done with journalists. It is this doxa that makes journalists file stories on Reliance even though they know that more often than not these stories will not get published. The doxa of their field about journalism enabling democratic discourse and the traditional investigative ideal, is also integrally suffused in their journalistic practice which has helped them evolve strategies to combat these attempts to exert control over their output through the practice of what one journalist terms as hit and run journalism; ‘if you hit them, don’t do it again in quick succession, lie quiet for a while’. Thus, some journalists are able to slip in and get some critical stories on business published though they may be diluted or buried in the back pages by their editors. The other unspoken strategy journalists adopt in the face of this heteronomy exerted by the economic field is to share their stories with their peers in rival media outlets even though it may be their scoop. They are willing to give up personal credit in the hope of getting the information in the public domain. As is clear, doxa is in persistent tension with and often times yields to the informal norms that have evolved over time. Informal norms include the tacit knowledge that certain individuals and business houses are off limits. These informal norms are by products of interactions in close knit groups and bring about conformity. Journalism is a more norm-dependent institution than others in society which explains why news looks so similar so often (Eide & Sjovaag, 2016). Thus, I argue that both formal and informal norms cohabit, and tension between the two results in strategies of resistance by journalists.

2. The power of myths

These have contributed to constraining journalists when it comes to covering business particularly Reliance or members of the political elite like Gandhi family or Modi. Socialization processes ensure that most journalists have heard stories of the serious repercussions that ensue if reporters are critical of Reliance or members of
the Gandhi family or Modi. The dominant economic and political elite have exercised legendary media clout often reinforced through getting journalists and editors fired or resorting to violent action to warn journalists. Reliance is deeply implicated in the crony capitalism culture of India and has loomed large in India’s economic growth story such that by now myth and fact have got blurred on how the conglomerate runs the government and the country. Here, NI emphasis of the power of “common understandings that are seldom explicitly articulated” helps explain the shared deep-rooted fear and understanding that coverage of Reliance is largely off limits.

Thus, new institutionalism supplements our understanding of the dynamics of journalism by conceptualizing a meso-level organizational environment from a micro-theory of rules (Ryfe, 2006). It has no tools to explain what motivates agents within a field and how they occupy positions relating to each other. Field theory does a much better job at reconciling the structure and agency dichotomy but still seems to come up short when one tries to understand individual agency and subversive acts that proved decisive in the Nira Radia case study. This provides us an answer to RQ 2 which asked how and in what ways do the internal processes within the field of journalism enable and constrain journalistic autonomy.

**Democratic Potential of the Internet**

In field theory architecture, it was the democratic impulses in the political field, thwarted by a subordinate journalistic field that employed emerging technology. Analyzing the media coverage of the election campaign for the national elections in 2014, Ranganathan (2014) observes that it was, in fact, the overriding commercial agenda of the mainstream media that pushed political actors, activists and voters alike on to the new media space (Ranganathan, 2014). Thus, her assertion that the employment of the new media space needs to be read in the context of the mainstream media’s role rather than in the context of new technologies’ potential upon democratic discourse.
In Gieryn’s conception of boundary work, non-journalists forced the “expansion” of the borders of journalism with new participants, practices and technologies coming to be absorbed as acceptable journalism (Gieryn, 1983). This, in turn, is indicative of the expansion of democracy, arguably, where journalism is no longer monopolized by a narrow elite. This case study would seem to provide empirical evidence that emerging technologies are challenging the pro-systemic bias in the mainstream commercial media. However, Dutton’s optimism about these forming a ‘fifth estate’ in Western liberal democracies needs to be tempered in contexts outside of the West (Dutton, 2009). There is no doubt that they are reconfiguring the state and citizen relationship. However, this can easily be mobilized for anti-democratic enactments as demonstrated by the right-wing Hindu assertion led by Narendra Modi. Co-option of these technologies and their mobilization by structures of power has significantly undermined enthusiasm about them. Interestingly, it co exists with dissent and critical journalism that has shifted online as the Modi regime becomes increasingly authoritarian.

This provides us insights to the RQ 2a on the role played by participatory internet enabled media in democratic consolidation.

**Performances of Distance**

Finally, the empirical findings of this paper’s research seem to augment Zelizer’s plea to decouple democracy from the understandings of journalism as it “undermines the capacity of journalism scholars to speak reliably about the world of journalism practice” particularly in a transitional, hybrid democracy (Zelizer, 2012, p. 469). The distance between actual practice and professed doxa aside, more pernicious is perhaps journalists employing practices such as the ‘performances of distance’ (Rao U., 2010, p. 117) or ‘ceremonial conformity’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340) to maintain a façade of adhering to the normative dimension of public service to obscure their instrumentalization. The media cynically invokes democratic ideals to legitimate its power and obscure its true role. As Tehranian states, “certain minimum democratic and media professional values” have permeated most media systems forming normative benchmarks for journalists which explains the need to pay lip
service to, if not actually take part in the democratic project, particularly in a country that has a vibrant public sphere (Tehranian, 2002, p. 72). Being deprived of these normative associations would make journalistic practices more transparent and accountable.

This research demonstrates a divergence between journalism and democracy with both following opposing trajectories and a need to generate a different understanding of the role the press plays in myriad democratic structures.

**Conclusion**

Thus, the evidence shows in sharp definition how each of the three theoretical perspectives need to be modified in contexts that are different to the ones where they were conceptualized. The synthesis adds and compliments these shortcomings in each of the perspectives. The findings bear out political economy’s contention that journalistic discourse does become reducible to pressures exerted by the elite, upholding their interests and working to further their interests. They work to manufacture consent for the elite especially when their interests are aligned as was demonstrated by Herman and Chomsky. However, the approach does not give sufficient weightage to the divergence of interests of the economic and political elite which pluralize journalistic discourse, however fleetingly, without necessarily changing the structural architecture. They also limit our understanding of the very real and concrete consequences of the internal dynamics of the journalistic universe and agency. This is precisely where the new institutional theory and field theory equip us with greater tools and enable a greater understanding of the field of journalism. The theoretical architecture would be severely handicapped without Bourdieu’s conception of the fluid and dynamic nature of interrelationships between structures and institutions and within them. Field theory allows us to account for and analyze shifts and changes in the positions of the fields and the actors within them instead of envisioning them as rigid and deterministic. The other advantage it brings to the theoretical architecture is it enables an understanding of actors’ motivations
and agency – a result of the actors positions in the field which are sites of struggle, competition to retain and gain capital and opportunity. Both political economy and new institutionalism elide the actions, processes and dynamics internal to journalism without which there is a very partial understanding of what journalism does and why it does it. New institutionalism is particularly useful in underscoring the significance of the political influence in these complex processes. It also helps understand how and in what circumstances the institution of journalism acts as a political actor by bringing into sharper definition the inter organizational field of journalism and the significant uniformity that develops in its practice, however counterintuitive it may seem to the interests of the institution. Thus, drawing the three approaches into dialogue proves to be very productive shining a light on their shortcomings and strengths in analyzing journalism in the Indian context.

This research illuminates the contentious and conflicting forces that crosscut journalism in the country. There seems little doubt that neoliberalism has enhanced heteronomous pressures on the news media particularly its ability to scrutinize interpenetrating interests of state and big business. Overall, the media serves the interests of the ruling elite. However, this subordination is challenged by liberating impulses that derive from deepening democratization of political institutions in the country in conjunction with divisions within the economic elite. It is often in the interstices of dissent amongst the economic elite and divergence between economic and political interests that the news media find themselves emancipated. Thus, the relationship between the news media and the economic elite can be conceptualized as that of contingent heteronomy. Broadly, the polity is marked by persistent tension between the opposing forces of economics of liberalization and the politics of empowerment in the Indian polity. The journalistic field becomes a site that reflects, shapes and is constituted by these conflicting and competing strains. Its autonomy and role in democratic consolidation is under constant negotiation.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

Barbie Zelizer presents a persuasive argument to divorce journalism from democracy that has for too long hindered the study of journalism as it resides on the ground rather than examine it through the normative vision scholars would wish for it (Zelizer, 2012). Scholarship on Indian journalism has, of late, begun to analyze its processes and structures without the rose-tinted glasses through which it was seen in the decades after independence (Chadha & Koliska, 2016; Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Mehta N., 2008; Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010; Rao & Mudgal, 2015). This research is an attempt to contribute to that body of literature on Indian journalism, a critical interrogation of the role it plays in the political processes of a country that is often celebrated as a shining example of democracy on the verge of economic superpowerdom. Very broadly, this thesis has attempted to answer the question of whether India journalism contributes to or fetters democratic consolidation and how, in a polity that has undergone profound changes since economic restructuring in 1991. It seeks to enhance an understanding of a diversity of journalistic norms and practices around the world as global scholarship on journalism attempts to shake off universalist assumptions about an idealized Anglo-American model of journalism (Geroge, 2013).

More specifically, this research aimed to analyze journalism and its interrelationships with power in a crony capitalist polity. In other words, what is the relationship between journalism and the ruling elite in the Indian polity. Interpenetration of the economic and political elite is implicated in influencing the trajectory of Indian democracy that has had a distinct evolution from Western democracies. Thus, the challenge this thesis took up was – 1) illuminating journalistic practice at the intersection of political and economic interests 2) examining the role journalism plays in democratic consolidation. There has been a deficit in critical interrogation of what happens to journalism at the intersection of the interests of politics, business
and media owners, what are these interrelationships, how do these forces interact and shape news. This project necessarily required delinking normative expectations of journalism from democracy to examine journalism as it exists in the Indian context while holding onto the idea that journalism should play a key role in enabling political participation and keeping a check on power in a liberal democracy.

In an attempt to find answers to these questions, this research examined how journalists reported on three news stories which represented egregious examples of interests of the ruling elite. As such, this research interviewed forty senior journalists drawn predominantly from the English language national news media based in the country’s political and business capital cities of New Delhi and Mumbai. The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling and the interviews were in-depth often lasting 3-4 hours with journalists who had a direct involvement in covering the three news stories that formed the three case studies of this dissertation. These case studies included - the news media’s extensive self-censorship of the Nira Radia conversations that exposed its nexus with the ruling elite in their negotiation over the division of ill-gotten wealth and resources in 2009-2010, the news media’s relationship with and coverage of the political elite including members of the Gandhi family who led the government till 2014 and the authoritarian BJP leader Narendra Modi and lastly, the news media’s relationship with and coverage of the country’s richest private company, Reliance Industries Limited, and its owner Mukesh Ambani.

Beneath the surface appearance of an independent and noisy news media lurks the reality of a journalism buffeted by strong heteronomous pressures that constrain its freedom and stifle its practice. These pressures are particularly strong when interests of the ruling elite are involved. The salient finding of this research is that the field of journalism collapses into the field of power when the pressures from the political and economic fields converge. In other words, the media displays significant subservience and deference towards the ruling elite particularly if their interests are aligned. The result is sustained self-censorship by the news media despite evident public interest in the news story even at the risk of losing audiences. This is
consistent with prior scholarship that posits that the degree of elite cohesion has a significant influence on the press and enfeebles the monitorial role of the news media (Bennett, 1997; Gans, 1979).

The findings of this research suggest that the historical convergence of the interests of the ruling class - political and economic - in a polity where crony capitalism has been a central and enduring feature, has not allowed journalism to develop boundaries entirely distinct from the economic and political fields. Incursions from converging political and economic fields in a crony capitalist state have been so significant that they have constrained the growth and evolution of a field wholly separate and independent of the field of power. As such, the assumption in field theory by Bourdieu and his followers of an inherent degree of autonomy in the journalistic field, however weak, is questionable. As is evident from this research, the default setting of the journalistic field seems to be heteronomy or subordination when confronted by interests of the ruling elite. Thus, this thesis argues that the institution of journalism needs to be treated as an empirical question that needs investigation in contexts outside the origin of theories like the field theory. Institutionalization of journalism or development of an independent field may vary along a continuum in countries whose trajectory is different from those in the West.

This research asserts that heteronomy, and not autonomy, is the inherent characteristic of Indian journalism in its relationship with the ruling class. That is precisely why I argue that the news media’s alignment with private capital to endorse and advocate the authoritarian right-wing BJP leader Narendra Modi in the run up to the national election of 2014 was not surprising contrary to observations by some media scholars. It was entirely in keeping with the news media’s tendency to submit to those in power, which entails not just discarding their accountability role but assuming the role of a propaganda organ. The news media narrative was pivotal in engineering a discursive shift in the perception of Modi, erasing his association with mass religious violence in the past, portraying him as a development-oriented leader with a proven record of clean governance. This was a case of political and economic interests aligning to eviscerate journalistic autonomy. There were murmurs of dissent
from a few individual journalists which were quelled swiftly as the journalistic field reoriented its heteronomy towards a new center of political power.

Thus, this thesis posits that the heteronomous pressures from the intertwined economic and political fields in a crony capitalist polity can be so significant that they rob the journalistic field of any autonomy. In these cases, the field of journalism is embedded within the field of power rather than existing outside it. However, it does not merely reside benignly inside this field of power but is recruited by the political and economic elite to aid the consolidation of the alliance of state and business. This was amply and disturbingly demonstrated by the Nira Radia tapes where the news media appeared to acting as messengers and brokers for the ruling elite besides advocating their interests subverting democracy.

Given the intermediate position journalism occupies between the economic and political fields, with access and proximity to both, it is in a unique position to enable the negotiations that take place between state and business, aiding consolidation of this oligarchic nexus. Political scientists argue that this embrace has become warmer since economic reforms. Economic restructuring has shifted the balance of power in favor of domestic business strengthening the power of business over the polity. The state also seemed to have become a broker to capital instead of discharging its role as a guardian of public interest (Pendakur, 2013). However, this alliance was arguably far more cohesive and narrow before liberalization of the economy. Dismantling of the stifling controls of a command economy has introduced new agents in the economic fields. There has been a degree of renewal with the rise of new entrepreneurs post liberalization amidst underlying continuity in entrenched business interests. As the state privatizes industries and resources controlled by the government before liberalization (example telecom scandal), new entrepreneurs jostle with entrenched capitalists for a share of the spoils. Therefore, there is constant negotiation over power sharing in the alliance between the political and economic elite (Kohli, 2001). The news media with its proximity to both, endowed with symbolic capital, gets recruited in this neoliberal project of consolidating and institutionalizing the crony capitalist alliance.
A pivotal democratic institution, journalism, that is charged with scrutinizing the power structure, has come to play a key role in maintaining and consolidating an alliance of the ruling elite that subverts democracy. Political scientists have noted the capture of non-elected institutions to serve the interests of the ruling class in crony capitalist democracies. That would include journalism in the Indian context which gets recruited in subverting rather than serving democracy. That is the reason I argue that Hallin and Mancini’s dimension of political parallelism needs to be modified in contexts like India. The news media leans disproportionately towards the hegemonic power structure rather than mirroring the diversity of the political structure. As such, the dimension of political parallelism would conceptually be of little use in analyzing the media system in India. This can be conceptualized as power parallelism instead.

However, the framework of electoral democracy of India places limits on this subservience. The extensive self-censorship was pierced, albeit fleetingly at times, by a combination of factors. These are enabled by a divergence between the interests of the political and business elite. Thus, field theory’s contention that the economic and political fields are intertwined in a manner that it is hard to unravel them to determine the influence of one or the other on the field of journalism holds true for the most part, however, this does not explain disruption in the news media’s lack of scrutiny of the ruling elite. This cannot be understood without disentangling the political from the economic and analyzing the role of each of these macro influences separately. Here, it is the insight provided by new institutionalism theory that the two need to be treated as analytically distinct that equips us in analyzing fissures in the media’s self-censorship.

Probing deeper structures of the Indian polity and how they have evolved tells us that universal franchise democracy has struck deep-seated and enduring roots. India has not merely been a procedural democracy. Regular and fair elections have resulted in deepening political participation and inclusion of the subaltern disrupting traditional, hierarchical social structures particularly caste relations (Varshney, 2000). Genuine political contestation allows new agents’ entry into the political field who challenge
entrenched interests in an attempt to gain legitimacy and establish themselves. Thus, it would be fair to assert that there has been significant mobilization due to the processes of political democracy. However, this should not be overstated as social and economic cleavages run deep. The state’s record in providing health, education and infrastructure is abysmal. In addition, the state has had an increasingly unapologetic growing probusiness tilt since the 1980s (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019), albeit a pro indigenous rather than a foreign business tilt. Scholars like Kohli argue that economic restructuring in 1991 represented a dramatic shift in balance of power towards business at the cost of its redistributive responsibilities with the state almost exclusively catering to narrow, private interests (Jaffrelot, Kohli, & Murali, 2019). Democratization has led to political empowerment but neoliberal policies have largely enriched the economic elite. As such, the polity is buffeted and pulled in two opposing directions - one pulling it towards deeper political empowerment and equality and the other, pulling it towards economic disempowerment and inequality. Growing democratization and politicization of myriad groups in the lower strata of society is in constant tension with accelerating accumulation. Evidence indicates that the contestation between these opposing forces often plays out in the news media and is shaped by it.

When the news media gave sustained critical coverage of the central role India’s richest company, Reliance Industries, plays in crony capitalism in the country, instead of the usual shroud of silence that is thrown over its activities, Reliance felt compelled to buy its silence by taking over the country’s biggest media company. Studies on news media ownership post liberalization bear out this trend of shadowy political and business groups using news media ownership as a means of accumulating political power and controlling the political discourse (Saeed, 2015). News ownership is in the hands of various groups who have dubious motives for controlling the message and messenger and as such, are hardly in a position to assume the accountability role vis-a-vis the powerful elite. Thus, the reductionism and elision of state in political economy would make the analysis of journalism very partial.
Although a substantial part of the findings are devoted to the structural influences on journalism in India, our understanding of the processes of journalism are incomplete without an internal reading of the journalistic field. Economic determinism does not adequately explain the disruption of the self-censorship of the news media in each of the case studies. As my thesis argues, heteronomous pressures particularly when political and economic interests are aligned emasculate any autonomy the journalistic field may possess. The field does not possess clear and distinct boundaries independent of the political and economic fields. And yet, the journalistic field has evolved to the extent that journalists resent incursions from the field of power and have a professional self-conception and ideology. Bourdieu’s field theory gives us tools to unravel and analyze the internal dynamics that combine with external influences in unpredictable ways to introduce intermittent windows of journalistic autonomy. This research illuminates professional norms and competition that drives journalists to defy the prevailing orthodoxy of treating some topics as taboo. The relative positions in the field and the interplay of cultural and economic capital possessed were crucial determinants of whether news organizations were subservient or critical of established power. Those with considerable economic and cultural power, that is, most mainstream media at the center of the field aligned themselves with the dominant power often justifying their self-censorship employing those very journalistic norms that were developed to uphold their monitorial role. It was smaller, economically impoverished players who stood to gain cultural capital in the struggle for recognition in a crowded field who were willing to take tremendous risks and disrupt the self-censorship. They also had journalists who were known for their integrity and speaking truth to power in authoritative positions to push the story through using stealth and their cultural capital.

Importantly, this research foregrounds individual agency of journalists who undertook great personal risks to break the journalistic orthodoxy of staying off certain members of the ruling elite. Field theory underestimates individual agency that gets obscured by the structural factors in enabling democratic discourse.

“Scholars need to recognize journalists’ attempts to hold on to the democratic values at the heart of the profession’s dominant paradigm, especially in societies where
those values are under assault and not part of the officially sanctioned discourse” (George, 2013, p. 490). These dangers have grown acute with the killing of a number of journalists in urban centers, earlier limited to remote rural areas, in the present regime. This further contributes to self-censorship by journalists.

Extensive self-censorship observed in all three case studies obscured the widespread notion of independence from the field of power and a watchdog role of the press in a democracy that constitutes the journalistic doxa or a shared, tacit understanding that marks the membership of the field of Indian journalism. This is in persistent tension with informal norms, as conceptualized by new institutional theory, that have evolved over time about certain subjects and powerful individuals being off limits for journalists. These have been sedimented by myths about the extraordinary power wielded by certain individuals or business houses and the retribution that would follow if journalists dare criticize them. This conflict between the two – doxa and informal norms, usually obscured by the news output, cannot be elided nevertheless. This research argues to recognize the gap and contradiction between doxa and informal norms results in ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance developed by journalists to get around the constraints they face when reporting on the ruling class (Scott, 1990). It also highlights just how fraught journalistic practice is in contexts where the need for close proximity and access to news sources has to be reconciled with holding them accountable.

This thesis has no pretensions of being the definitive work on the role of the media and how it has transformed in a neoliberal India but it is an addition to a growing canon of scholarship on the relationship between journalism and the evolving democratic processes in the Indian polity. It is a sobering account of how the news media, particularly in its relationship with the ruling elite, does the exact opposite of what it is charged to do in a democracy - aiding the consolidation of those forces and that narrow elite that has shown ‘how laughably easy it is to subvert a supposedly robust democracy’ (Mehta V., 2013). This is not to discount the empowering role journalism has played in disseminating information and creating a hunger for news, giving the middle class a voice and holding the powerful to account in myriad ways.
It should be added that the growing authoritarianism in the country since the election of Narendra Modi in 2014 has radically altered the nature of the political field significantly attenuating space for intra-elite rivalry or popular mobilization. Therefore, the conclusions of this research may need to be modified if the period of study is advanced.

What this research does, for the first time, is to go beyond illuminating journalistic practice and outlining the trends and constraints that inform it. It searches for answers to why it plays the role it does and bends to the constraints as it does. It teases out the relationship between the deeper structural features of the polity and how they shape journalism and vice versa. It brings into sharp focus how restricted this otherwise diverse, boisterous, independent media is in its relationship with the ruling class. These are constraints that cannot be explained purely by economic determinism or only actor-oriented reasons. It doesn’t just stop at saying that the media has become a significant factor in India’s complex socio-cultural matrix (Mehta, 2015). It explains what kind of factor the media is in this landscape and why. India’s distinct political-economic features explain why the media plays a role that is different from the role journalism plays in other developing countries. It draws out the relationship between journalism as a concrete social formation and its relationship with political and economic power. And the implications for journalism and journalistic practice when this political-economic architecture underwent a profound transformation as it did in the restructuring in 1991, how has the role and position of the media changed in the country’s neoliberal turn vis-a-vis the state and business.

There are several limitations in this enterprise - principal among them being that this research is limited to the English language news media based in the national and business capitals of the country, therefore, it cannot claim to be truly representative in a country divided along many lines. Additionally, it is based on qualitative research which may not paint an adequately comprehensive picture of the processes and dynamics of journalistic practice. It is subject to biases of its interviewer and interviewees. In future, it could be combined with a quantitative survey to give a
more representative picture of Indian journalism. This thesis opens up many new avenues of further research such as investigating the vernacular media and its relationships with power. The relationship between politics, business and media owners needs further exploration in regional variations. This research also has heuristic potential in analyzing the factors that lead to the formation of journalistic agency and transcripts of resistance by looking at journalists’ positions in the field and their habitus. Agency is overlooked in most structural analysis and the question of how some journalists are able to withstand and challenge the pressures they face while others do not could be the subject of future research.


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