

# A Primer on Prime Time Debates of Malayalam News Channels

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## Abstract

During non-election times, Malayalam news channels telecast stories, debates and reports on latest developments of social issues. Whereas, during the election times, these channels cover election campaign, candidature, and conduct debates on various topics like manifesto of different political parties and their approach to various issues, old and new controversies, etc. In such debates and news programmes, views of electorates as well as experts from the field concerned are also presented. The research paper, with the support of a qualitative content analysis conducted on four prime time news programmes, explores the genre of news programmes and debates of Malayalam news channels. The prime-time programmes selected for the study are as follows: “Counter Point” of *Malayala Manorama*, “News Hour” of *Asianet News*, “News Night” of *Indiavision*, and *News N Views of People*. The paper claims that these channels invariably subscribed to certain styles and formats of similarity and synchronicity during the 2011 Kerala Assembly polls—be it in the selection of topics or presentation.

**Keywords:** Prime Time Debates, News and Debate Shows, Malayalam News Channels, Genre, Synchronicity.

Today, elections have become grand spectacles. They are more colourful than ever. There is more noise than there ever was. More people get involved in it, and hence draw even more into it. Polls, in a way, have become the web of politics. No wonder television, the most entertaining mass medium in action today, celebrates election seasons with pyrotechnics of all sorts. News channels run long debates that feature pundits; they beam in-your-face reports on political candidates; they produce in-depth news analysis on events that can make or break poll outcomes. Well, can they actually spell doom or bloom for political parties by influencing public opinion? That is a question the discipline of political communication has been trying to answer for quite some time now.

Political debates have different formats in different countries, and have grabbed much research focus and attention. When research on political debates is mentioned, it is usually referred to presidential debates research. Other formats of debates did not get due research attention. In this study, the purview of research rests on news-based debates, and that is, panel discussions followed in main news bulletins, particularly prime-time news bulletins. Like in presidential debates, it also encompasses arguments, counter arguments and makes use of all aspects of rhetoric and persuasion.

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In modern democracies, television has become the most powerful and influential venue for political commentaries and debates. They carry the essence of current affairs in relation to political parties and candidature. Debates and political commentaries feature in daily news bulletins as well as special weekly programmes. American writer and columnist Eric Alterman argues that “political pundit”, a special group of people who debate political opinions and make predictions, has become an indispensable factor in opinionated media societies (Nord, 2008). Today, all the news channels world-wide have the genre of programmes where pundits taking to other pundits on various subjects. “To construct an impression of objectivity on these programmes, journalists and academics are frequently invited to appear or prominent liberals and conservatives are paired, to demonstrate a concern for ideological balance” (Gulati, Just and Crigler, 2004, p.243). Earlier, many studies have been carried to comprehend the influential relationship between watching television debates and the viewer’s political awareness of the issues they discuss in relation to the candidate’s or the party’s stand on the same (Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber, 1978).

William L. Benoit and Tamir Sheafer (2006) have documented the evolution and growth of television debates in different countries. Apart from debates centered on American Presidential elections, numerous debates have held in many other countries during the elections for their leadership such as presidents, prime ministers, senators and etc. The practice of organising debates on political issues during elections can be traced as early as 1948 in Sweden. Such debates were instrumental in the elections of various positions. Telecasting those debates offered a wider reach. It was in Australia in 1958, the first telecast of political debate was made. The practice was later adopted and followed by the countries like France, Germany, Israel, Greece, Holland, Scotland, Korea, Ukraine, New Zeland, South Korea, etc. William L Benoit and Tamir Sheafer (2006) carried out a study on the nature of political debates and their influences on elections. They analysed the content of five Israeli prime ministers’ debates organized during the elections held in 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996 and 1999. The study also compared the findings with the elections of the U.S for understanding similarities and contrasts in style and content.

Another content analysis study was conducted by Charlette Jorgensen et al (1998). They analyzed the content of 37 televised debates conducted live before select viewers in Denmark with before and after opinion polls. The Danish Broadcasting Corporation showed those 37 one-hour debates, under the title of Town Parliament (Bytinget).

The present study is also a humble attempt to analyse the content of prime-time television debate programmes telecast on the four news channels in Malayalam during the crucial Assembly polls held in Kerala in 2011. The key objective of this study is to explore the style and format of primetime television debates of Malayalam news channels. Further, it also tries to analyse the topics of debates on Malayalam channels during 2011 Kerala assembly elections so as to understand the synchronicity and similarity of the topics. During non-election times, Malayalam news channels telecast stories, debates and reports on latest developments of social issues. Whereas, during the election times, these channels cover election campaign, candidature, manifesto of different political parties and their approach to various issues, old and new controversies, etc. In such debates and news programmes, views of electorates as well as experts from the field concerned are also presented. These debates help educate the electorates about the issues the political representatives and parties address.

The current study falls under the discipline called Political Communication which probes into various factors of news stories, news debates and news programmes that influence electoral behavior. The research is carried out by the qualitative content analysis of news-based debate programmes of four Malayalam channels. The channels and prime time programmes are as follows: *Asianet News’ News Hour*, *Indiavision’s News Night*,

*People's News N views* and *Manorama News' Counter Point/ Prime Time News*. An analysis of these select programmes telecast from 19 February 2011 to 10 April 2011 is made for the purpose. The observations of the analysis are discussed in the following segments.

### **The Style and Format of News and Debate Programmes**

News channels are highly influential, especially when it comes to public opinion formation. These news channels are capable of making the viewers educated on the topics that they telecast. News programmes in such channels have gained wide popularity. That the news anchors like M.V. Nikesh Kumar of *Reporter*, Arnab Gowsami of *Times Now* and Prannoy Roy of *NDTV* gain popularity reveals how people are fascinated toward watching news programmes. Latter-day news anchors enjoy the status of film actors. As a result, these anchors and news programmes are capable enough to influence the public and shape their opinion. Following the same fashion, politicians also appear in news programmes to debate, inform, and educate the public on matters of political interest. People, in order to make themselves aware of day-to-day political and social affairs, watch news programmes.

Malayalam news channels present their prime-time news bulletins daily between 9.00 pm and 10.00 pm. These shows are meant to present the major events of the day. Having summed up these events, debates on select topics will be made in the presence of political representatives, the public and experts from the fields concerned. As pioneers in the field of telecasting news shows, English channels like *CNN-IBN*, *Headlines Today*, *Times Now*, *NDTV* etc have made a style and format in their presentation over years. Malayalam channels and also other regional language channels follow this style and format in their prime news shows. This study focuses on the content of prime-time television debate programmes telecast on the four news channels in Malayalam viz *Manorama News*, *India Vision*, *Asianet News* and *People*. These four news channels were only there during the 2011 Assembly election period in Kerala. These channels re-telecast the news and debate shows in the wee hours.

Commonly, the duration of such programmes is one hour. These shows have breaks with commercial advertisements. The news presenter reads news. At the same time, the headlines of those news stories appear on screen. For those important news stories, the presenter will introduce a panel for discussion. The panel may comprise of two to five experts. Here, the presenter acts the role of a moderator as well. The panelists are provided with time to present their views on the topic. They can respond to the arguments made by other discussants. The panelists can participate in the debates either by presenting themselves in the channel studio or over phone. While on phone, their photographs will be displayed on screen with their names and designations. News channels ensure participation of political leaders and experts in such debates. There is always a competition between the channels in this regard. In matters of politics, these channels usually invite political spokespersons from major political parties in Kerala like UDF, LDF, and BJP. Moreover, presence of political scientists, field experts, and media persons also will be ensured in order to provide a neutral view point on such matters.

There is a practice of telecasting a recorded debate shows at the prime time. An exchange of heated arguments and counter arguments can be witnessed during debate shows. Most of the time, the discussants ask for more time to present their arguments. The news presenter arbitrates between the participants, and concludes the major arguments. It is followed by a commercial break. The news presenter picks up fresh news to read after the break.

Following is an analysis made on the style and format of the select four Malayalam news channels:

### **News Hour Show of Asianet News**

*The News Hour is the primetime news bulletin of the Malayalam television channel Asianet News.* This programme is telecast between 9 pm and 10 pm daily. They re-telecast the same during the wee hours of the day. To begin with, the news presenter reads out major news stories of that day. It takes three to five minutes. It is followed by a debate on a select relevant event. The 30-40-minute-long session will have commercial breaks. Remaining fifteen minutes will be dedicated to sports, business, etc. The leading news anchors of News Hour programme during the 2011 Kerala Assembly Poll were Vinu V John, Manjush Gopal and Harshan TM.

Let us analyse a one day's News Hour debate show with an example in order to comprehend the style and format of the programme. The news show of 22 February 2011 held a debate titled "Opposition targets Chief Minister." The topic of debate was the charges put forward by the United Democratic Front (UDF) against V.A. Arun Kumar, Chief Minister VS Achuthanandan's son. Harshan TM was the news presenter and moderator. The panel consisted of V A Arunkumar, son of the chief minister V.S Achuthanandan, V.D Satheeshan MLA, the Congress leader, K.N. Balagopal MP, the CPM leader and V.S. Sunil Kumar MLA, the CPI leader discussed and debated over the alleged unholy alliance between the chief minister's son and lottery and sandalwood lobby. According to the gravity of issues, the show facilitates two debates in a single show. These two debates will have two different panels of discussants. Time dedicated to each will differ according to the relevance of the topic. The News Hour show of 11 March 2011 can be cited as an example for such a pattern. The topics of debates were Japanese Tsunami and the seat sharing policy of UDF.

### **Indiavision's News Night**

With its launch, *Indiavision* introduced the concept of a full-time news channel in Kerala. In this way, the channel cultivated among Malayalam television audience a new culture of viewing 24-hours news programmes. News Night, telecast between 9 pm and 10 pm, was the most viewed programme of the channel. The same show was re-telecast during the wee hours of the day. The style and format of the news show were introduced by M.V. Nikesh Kumar, the star presenter of *Indiavision*, which he largely borrowed from the national channels like *CNN-IBN* and *NDTV*.

One can identify similarities between the presentation formats adopted by News Night of *Indiavision*, News Hour of *Asianet News* and News N Views of *People*. The show begins with presenting major news stories of that day. The two to three minutes long session is followed by a debate on the most relevant issue of the day. Thirty to forty minutes are dedicated to this session during which commercial breaks are also included. Field experts and representatives of political parties are invited as discussants. The show accommodates two debates when there are important news breaks; two panels of discussants will address each issue separately. The debate session will be followed by presentation of other news stories of that day. It may take 15-20 minutes. There are instances for having held more than one debate in a single show: News Night conducted two debates on 08 April 2011. One was on the hunger strike by Anna Hazare for Lokpal Bill. The other debate was on the starting of IPL Cricket season 4.

Leading news presenters and anchors of News Night show during the 2011 Kerala Assembly Polls were Veena George and E Saneesh. An analysis of the style and format of a day's News Hour show can provide better understanding: The News Night on March 25, 2011 debated on the matters mentioned in the manifesto released by UDF with the title "Do promises only remain on paper?" The panellists of the debate were the Socialist Janatha Dal leader Varghese George, the CPM leader Anathalavattom Anandan and political observer G Gopakumar. E Saneesh was the news presenter of that day.

### **People's News N Views**

This Malayalam news channel is lenient toward the leftist parties in Kerala. It presents divergent news on issues. News N Views is the channel's prime news show that runs between 9 pm and 10 pm daily, and a repeat of the same is at 11:30 pm on the same day. The news show holds debates and news-roundup on the most important issue of each day.

When looked into the style and format, this prime news show also follows the same format for presentation. Headlines of the day will be read by the anchor for two to three minutes. Simultaneously, they will be displayed on the screen. The session will be followed by debate on the most relevant issue of that day. If there are two topics for discussion, two panels of discussants will be invited. A one-day's News N Views is described below to better comprehend the style and format of the show: the show witnessed a debate on the controversies related to the selection of UDF candidates. Sarath Chandran presented the topic and moderated the debate. CPM leader K.N. Balagopal MP, Congress leader Rajmohan Unnithan and senior journalist P. Rajan participated in the debate as discussants. Accusations of favoritism at the cost of a decent politics made by former Health Minister K.K. Ramachandran Master against Oommen Chandy, the Leader in Opposition and KPCC President Ramesh Chennithala was the major content of the debate. The news show introduced a special news programme during the 2011 Kerala election campaigns under the title, 'Janavidhi'.

The news show also conducted two debates on the same show on occasions when there are two important issues to be discussed in detail. For example, the show on 03 March 2011 had two topics for debates: first debate was on the intervention made by the Supreme Court on the CVC appointments. The second topic was on the conflicts live in the UDF in matters of seat sharing. The show was marked for the presentation skills of the anchors Sarath Chandran and K. Rajendran during the 2011 Kerala Niyamasabha Polls.

### **Counter Point and Prime Time News of *Manorama News***

*Manorama News* follows a different pattern for its news and debate presentation. The channel has two segments dedicated separately for news story presentation and news debate. The first segment Prime Time News runs between 9 pm to 9:30 pm during which the anchor presents news of the day. It is followed by the second segment Counter Point. The 30-minutes long segment debates on major issues of that day.

Counter Point is repeated in the wee hours of the day. There is no Counter Point debate show on Sundays. The Prime Time News carries a discussion on Sundays.

An analysis of a session of Counter Point will be beneficial for understanding the style and format of the debate show. The 30 March 2011 News show discussed the Supreme Court's stay over the decision of the Civil Supplies Department to distribute rice at the rate of Rs 2 per kg. They had already issued a stay over the Kerala Government order (February 25 2011) which extended the subsidized distribution of rice to all ration card holders. In effect, the Supreme Court stay order would smear the image of LDF Government. The discussants were Thomas Issac (Finance Minister), M.I Shanavas MP (Congress), and the political observer G. Gopakumar. Venu Balakrishnan presented the news and moderated the debate. Venu Balakrishnan and Shani Prabhakaran hosted the Counter Point. At the same time, on Sundays, when there were no *Counter Point* shows, Nisha Purushothaman led the discussion in prime-time news bulletins.

### **Topics Debated in News Channels: Similarity and Synchronicity**

Malayalam news channels have discussed and debated a huge number of topics during the election campaigns. An analysis of the topics debated during elections shows the

nature of channel debates in Kerala and highlights how far they are election-centric. In order to comprehend this factor, the researcher analysed the live debates of these channels telecast between 19<sup>th</sup> February and 10<sup>th</sup> April 2011. The researcher prepared a schedule of issues discussed on more than one television debate show and identified as many as 16 topics featured on these channels' news shows.

The researcher finds similarity between topics that these four Malayalam news channels discussed. The electoral issues discussed by the four television channels are almost identical (Table 1). Most shows debated over the issues that were pertaining to election and election campaign like seat sharing controversies in UDF, Candidature of VS Achutanandan, his son's involvement in lottery scam, alliance between Jamaat-e-Islami and LDF, etc. Other minor topics like R Balakrishna Pillai's imprisonment also were broached onto the desk of debate. Pillai was arrested on the grounds of corruption as electricity minister associated with granting the Idamalayar Hydraulic Project contract (see Table 1 & 2). The list of key issues that found space in debates during the 2011 Kerala Polls is given in the table:

**Table 1**

**Topics Debated on Malayalam News Channels**

<b>DATE</b>	<b><i>Asianet News'</i> News Hour (34 days)</b>	<b><i>Indiavision's</i> News Night (35 days)</b>	<b><i>People's</i> News N Views (32 days)</b>	<b><i>Manorama News'</i> Counter Point/ Prime Time News (33 days)</b>
19-02-2011	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> KM Mani's statement challenging the Congress.	<b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> KM Mani's statement.	<b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> KM Mani's statement.	<b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> KM Mani's statement
20-02-2011	<b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> KM Mani's claim on Thodupuzha seat.	<b>UDF Seat sharing</b> KM Mani's claim on Thodupuzha seat.	<b>UDF Seat sharing</b> KM Mani's claim on Thodupuzha seat.	
22-02-2011	<b>Charges against VS Achuthanandan's son.</b> Opposition walks out of Assembly over charges against VS' son.	<b>Charges against VS' son.</b> Opposition walks out Assembly over charges against VS' son.	<b>Lottery scam.</b> Assembly adjourned following unruly scenes.	<b>Charges against VS' son.</b> Opposition walks out of Assembly over charges against VS' son.
23-02-2011	<b>Lottery Scam</b> and Palmolein case	<b>Lottery scam.</b> Charges against VS' son.	<b>Palmolein case.</b> Allegations against the opposition leader Oommen Chandy.	<b>Back-door appointments.</b> Opposition's allegations in Assembly.
24-02-2011	<b>Charges against VS' son.</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Assembly session ends trading graft charges.	<b>Charges against VS' son.</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Assembly ends session trading graft charges.	<b>12<sup>th</sup> Assembly ends session.</b> Opposition charges are baseless, says	<b>Charges against VS' son.</b> Opposition strikes again.

DATE	<i>Asianet News'</i> News Hour (34 days)	<i>Indiavision's</i> News Night (35 days)	<i>People's</i> News N Views (32 days)	<i>Manorama News'</i> Counter Point/ Prime Time News (33 days)
			LDF	
25-02-2011		<b>Central Railway Budget.</b> Disappointment for Kerala.	<b>Central Railway Budget.</b> Disappointment for Kerala.	<b>Central Railway Budget.</b> Kerala's gains and losses.
26-02-2011	<b>Charges against VS and his Son.</b> VS' Press Conference.	<b>VS' Press conference:</b> Ready for Probe against son	<b>VS' Press conference:</b> Ready for Probe against son	<b>Charges against VS' Son.</b> VS' press conference
27-02-2011	<b>Nadapuram bomb blast.</b> Charges against IUML, the UDF ally.	<b>Nadapuram bomb blast.</b> Charges against IUML	<b>Nadapuram bomb blast.</b> Charges against IUML,	<b>Lottery scam.</b> VS' letter to Prime Minister.
02-03-2011	<b>Congress candidate list.</b> Demand for new faces.	<b>LDF seat sharing.</b> RSP's claims for more seats.	<b>Lottery Scam.</b> VS' letter to Prime minister.	<b>Congress' candidate List.</b> Chance for new faces.
03-03-2011	<b>CVC Appointment.</b> Supreme Court nullifies the nomination of PJ Thomas as CVC.	<b>CVC Appointment.</b> Supreme Court nullifies the nomination of PJ Thomas as CVC.	<b>CVC Appointment.</b> Supreme Court nullifies the nomination of PJ Thomas as CVC. <b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> JSS' concerns.	<b>VS' Candidature.</b> Ready to contest election if Party proposes, says VS.
08-03-2011	<b>UDF momentum.</b> Asianet News- C Voter Pre-poll survey analysis predicts UDF win	<b>VS' candidature.</b> Uncertain about his candidature.	<b>Congress' candidate list.</b> Ramesh Chennithala to enter the fray.	<b>Congress' Candidate List.</b> Ramesh Chennithala to enter the fray.
09-03-2011	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> Demands and complaints of JSS, a UDF ally.	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> UDF stuck with JSS seats.	<b>Rice at Rs.2 a Kg Scheme.</b> Intervention of Election Commission.	<b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> KCM and JSS dissent with Congress.
10-03-2011	<b>VS' candidature.</b> VS is not in the list prepared by CPI (M) district committee.	<b>VS' candidature.</b> VS Achuthanandan is not in the list prepared by CPI (M) district committee.	<b>UDF seat sharing;</b> KM Mani claims for 22 seats.	<b>VS' candidature.</b> VS Achuthanandan is not in the list prepared by CPI (M) district committee.
11-03-2011	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> KM Mani sticks to seat demand.	<b>VS' candidature.</b> CPI (M) undecided over key candidates.		
12-03-2011	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b>	<b>LDF, UDF seat sharing.</b> Dissent	<b>LDF seat sharing.</b> Seat	<b>Congress' Candidate list.</b> Dissent brewing

DATE	<i>Asianet News'</i> <b>News Hour</b> (34 days)	<i>Indiavision's</i> <b>News Night</b> (35 days)	<i>People's</i> <b>News N Views</b> (32 days)	<i>Manorama News'</i> <b>Counter Point/ Prime</b> <b>Time News</b> (33 days)
	Congress-JSS discussions fail to break dead lock.	brewing in UDF.	sharing almost completed.	among Congress seat aspirants.
16-03-2011	<b>VS' Candidature.</b> CPI (M) denies ticket to VS.	<b>VS' candidature.</b> VS won't be there in the fray.	<b>VS' candidature.</b> VS and Pinarayi Vijayan not to contest polls.	<b>VS' Candidature.</b> CPI (M) denies ticket to VS Achuthanandan.
17-03-2011	<b>VS' candidature.</b> Available PB discussed the issue.	<b>VS' candidature:</b> Pro-VS marches all over Kerala.	<b>Wikileaks Expose</b> Cash-for-votes expose rocks parliament.	<b>VS' Candidature.</b> Pro-VS marches against denial of seat to VS in polls.
19-03-2011	<b>VS' candidature.</b> Pro VS marches and VS' Press conference.	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> Congress tied down differences with SJD, CMP.	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> Dissent brewing in KC (M).	<b>VS' Candidature.</b> VS' statement that he never said he wanted to opt out of fray.
20-03-2011	<b>Rebel Menace in UDF.</b> Three UDF leaders to contest as LDF Independents.	<b>Rebel Menace in UDF.</b> Three UDF leaders to contest as LDF Independents.	<b>Rebel Menace in UDF.</b> Three UDF leaders to contest as LDF Independents.	<b>Congress' Candidate list.</b> Rebel Menace rears its head.
21-03-2011	<b>UDF seat sharing and Congress' candidate list.</b> Joseph M Puthussery left out of Kerala Congress (M) list.	<b>Congress' candidate list.</b> Allegations of left-out leaders in candidate list.	<b>Congress' candidate list.</b> Congress grappling with 30 seats.	<b>Rice at Rs. 2 a Kg scheme.</b> High Court opposes Election Commissions stay over Rice at Rs. 2 a Kg scheme listed in LDF manifesto
23-03-2011	<b>Congress' candidate list.</b> Congress grappling with protests.	<b>UDF seat sharing.</b> Dissent brewing among leaders.	<b>Congress' candidate list.</b> Congress grappling with protests.	<b>Congress' Candidate list</b> evokes mixed response.
24-03-2011	<b>Sindhu Joy in Congress.</b> Sindhu Joy, former SFI leader, joins Congress.	<b>Ready for Election.</b> Filing of nominations begin	<b>Sindhu Joy in Congress.</b> CPI (M) expels her.	<b>Sindhu Joy in Congress.</b> CPI (M) expels her.
25-03-2011	<b>Rice at Rs. 2 a Kg scheme (LDF manifesto).</b> UDF promises rice at Re.1 a Kg.	<b>UDF Manifesto.</b> Promises on paper?	<b>UDF Manifesto.</b> A rice bowl of promises.	<b>R Balakrishna Pillai's imprisonment, Ice-cream case.</b> VS' revenge politics?
26-03-2011	<b>Women against Top Leaders.</b> Parties filed women to take on stalwarts	<b>BJP in 'Wikileaks' Row.</b> Arun Jaitley's comments on the BJP's 'opportunistic'	<b>UDF Seat sharing.</b> UDF shuffles seat allocation in last minutes.	<b>Election picture is clear.</b> Confidence of LDF and UDF.



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		Hindu nationalism.		
27-03-2011	<b>Secret tie-up with BJP.</b> Both LDF and UDF allege secret BJP tie-up.	<b>Indo-Pak talks.</b> Cricket politics and diplomatic affairs.	<b>Palmolein case;</b> Oommen Chandy's role. <b>Helicopter for Campaign.</b> UDF in trouble.	<b>Allegation on BJP-CPM tie-up in Malampuzha.</b> Chennithala sees CPI (M) BJP tie-up in polls.
28-03-2011	<b>Use of helicopter for election campaigns:</b> LDF criticized UDF for opting choppers.	<b>Black Money Row.</b> Supreme Court against Central Government stance.	<b>Central Govt. corruption cases.</b> A Key electoral issue.	<b>Use of Helicopter.</b> CPI (M) criticizes UDF plan to use helicopter for election campaign
29-03-2011	<b>Corrupt money for campaign.</b> In the context of plan to use chopper for campaign.	<b>Indo-Pak talks.</b> Cricket politics and diplomatic affairs.	<b>Congress' candidate list.</b> Ramachandran Master alleges payment seats and outbreaks in a press conference.	<b>LDF leaders' slapping controversy.</b> P Jayarajan CPI (M) leader slaps a media person; C Divakaran CPI leader manhandles a voter
30-03-2011	<b>TMC Front will win in West Bengal:</b> Analysis of pre-poll survey		<b>Final candidates list is ready.</b> The election scenario is clear.	<b>The Supreme Court intervenes in the subsidised rice scheme.</b> (LDF manifesto)
31-03-2011	<b>UDF will gain absolute majority:</b> Analysis of Asianet C Voter Survey.	<b>A.K. Antony against VS Achuthanandan.</b> Antony takes swipes at VS says Chief Minister's words and deeds do not match.		<b>Antony against VS.</b> Antony unleashes rockets against VS Achuthanandan and LDF.
04-04-2011	<b>Ice-cream case.</b> VS' intervention.	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami alliance.</b> Talks between Jamaat-e-Islami leaders and Pinarayi Vijayan.	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami alliance.</b> Jamaat-e-Islami meets Pinarayi Vijayan.	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami alliance.</b> Jamaat leaders hold discussion with CPI (M) leader Pinarayi Vijayan.
05-04-2011	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami alliance.</b> Both fronts refuse alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami.	<b>Lottery scam and Jamaat-e-Islami alliance.</b> Electoral politics turn controversial.	<b>Lottery scam.</b> Central Govt. changes its stance. <b>Ice-cream case.</b> Vigilance enquiry begins.	<b>Ice-cream case.</b> VS need not interfere and guide the case.
06-04-2011	<b>VS' comments against Lathika Subhash.</b> Protests	<b>VS' comments on Lathika Subhash and</b>	<b>Ice-cream case.</b> Again, a controversial	<b>VS' comments on Lathika Subhash.</b> Protest against VS'

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	against VS’ comments.	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami alliance row.</b> Electoral politics turn controversial.	electoral issue.	comments.
07-04-2011	<b>Central Govt. Corruption cases.</b> Support for Anna Hazare’s agitation against corruption.	<b>Central Govt. corruption cases;</b> Anna Hazare stubborn in his hunger strike.	<b>Ice-cream case.</b> K.A Rauf’s revealings	<b>Central Govt. corruption cases.</b> Anna Hazare movement strengthens.
08-04-2011	<b>Anna Hazare movement.</b> Hazare’s hunger strike becomes successful.	<b>Central Govt. corruption cases.</b> Anna Hazare succeeds in his strike	<b>Central Govt. corruption cases.</b> Anna Hazare’s hunger strike.	<b>Hazare movement against corruption.</b> Hazare’s hunger strike is successful.
09-04-2011		<b>Campaign issues in general.</b> Serious issues overlooked.		<b>Ice-cream case.</b> VS makes stronger his stance.
10-04-2011	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami alliance.</b> Jamaat supports LDF in 124 seats.	<b>Election campaigns end.</b> Fronts go for last moment strategies.		

(Muneer V, 2015)

**Table 2**

**Snippets of 16 Issues Debated**

**Malayalam television channels debated several key issues in the run up to the state assembly polls 2011. A lowdown of shortlisted influential issues are given below:**

<b>1</b>	<p><b>R. Balakrishna Pilla’s imprisonment</b></p> <p>In the controversial Idamalayar case, former Kerala Minister R Balakrishna Pillai was sent to prison. The Supreme Court dismissed the review petition filed by Pillai challenging the imposition of the one-year rigorous imprisonment handed down to him and two others for abusing their position in the award of contract for the Idamalayar hydroelectric power project. And the issue stuck a heavy blow on the UDF’s election campaign prospects.</p>
<b>2</b>	<p><b>Charges against VS’ son</b></p> <p>The state politics witnessed tremors after the opposition UDF charged VA Arun Kumar, ruling LDF chief minister VS Achuthanandan’s son, with involvement in a lottery mafia and sandalwood lobby in the state. The UDF took the issue to the House, while the LDF was on the defensive guarding the CM who on 26 Feb 2011 informed the media that the government would order any kind of inquiry into the allegations.</p>

3	<p><b>Lottery Scam</b></p> <p>Opposition's charges against chief minister VS Achuthanandan that he paved way for the proliferation on lotteries from other states in Kerala stirred a hornet's nest. The Congress charged that finance minister Thomas Isaac took a lackadaisical approach to the issue and took a long time to act. On 22 February 2011, Congress member V. D. Satheesan gave notice for a submission in Kerala assembly on a letter written by Achuthanandan to Union Home minister P. Chidambaram seeking an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into the sale of other-State lotteries in Kerala, but Achuthanandan did not divulge the details of the letter for 55 days and filed an affidavit against the Centre in the Kerala High Court. The issue snowballed into a controversy</p>
4	<p><b>Ice-cream case</b></p> <p>The two-decade-old sex scandal resurfaced following a series of fresh, controversial statements from K. A. Rauf, who was a one-time aide and relative of Muslim League leader P. K. Kunhalikutty, accused to have had links to a prostitution racket based in Calicut. The leader was later let off. But the row kept burning on. Especially with chief minister V.S. Achuthanandan ordering a re-investigation of the case.</p>
5	<p><b>Back-door appointments</b></p> <p>Wayanad district, lying north-east in the state, witnessed a political storm after a job racket was exposed in Wayanad. Later, it was found that the racket, run by Abhilash Pillai and team, had roots in several other parts of the state. In Wayanad, it was found that at least eight people had got into government jobs via these illegal entry points. The UDF took the matter to the state assembly and triggered a series of discussions of similar events in the state.</p>
6	<p><b>Central Govt. Corruption cases</b></p> <p>In the backdrop of the Jan Lokpal movement and the hunger strike of social activist Anna Hazare in Delhi, the ruling LDF in Kerala highlighted the big-ticket corruption scandals — the multi-crore 2G spectrum auction controversy and the corrupt practices at the Delhi Commonwealth Games — involving leaders from the UPA in general and the Congress in particular, and started an intense debate around the issues.</p>
7	<p><b>UDF Seat Sharing</b></p> <p>The chaotic scenario in the UDF over sharing seats for poll contestants kicked up a row with the Congress finding itself in the midst of an ugly tussle between its small bed mates in the alliance. It started when K. M Mani, the leader of KCM, claimed 22 seats. Later, other allies, JSS, SJD, CMP, KC (J), joined the chorus.</p>
8	<p><b>Rebel Menace in UDF</b></p> <p>Protesting the UDF decision to keep them off poll fray, three UDF leaders — Stephen George of KC (M) in Kaduthuruthy, M V Jayadali of the Congress in Kattakada, and George J Mathew, former Congress MLA from Kanjirappally — walked out of the front and contested as independent candidates. Among them, Jayadali and Stephen found LDF backing.</p>
9	<p><b>VS' Candidature</b></p> <p>When the media reported that the district committees of CPI (M) did not include LDF leader and chief minister V.S. Achuthanandan's name in the probable candidates list to the State Committee, a huge public outcry erupted. When the State Committee backed the decision, the public anger soared, forcing the party's Politburo to reverse the decision.</p>
10	<p><b>Congress' candidate list</b></p> <p>When the Congress started discussions on whom to field in the coming polls, several dissident voices came up along with intense rumours of a possible change of guard at the top brass when KPCC president Ramesh Chennithala entered the fray. Meanwhile, the youth wing of the party demanded more seats for its fraternity, the left-out leaders</p>

	took their discontent to media forums and public venues.
<b>11</b>	<b>Rice at Rs.2 a kg scheme</b> A much-popular scheme introduced by the LDF to offer one kilo of rice at a curiously cheap rates of Rs 2 became a heated subject of discussion when the Election Commission intervened and applied brakes on the extension of the scheme. But the Kerala High Court set aside the order. But the Supreme Court stayed the HC order later. But the issue influenced poll debates significantly, prompting even the UDF to come up with a similar promise in its manifesto.
<b>12</b>	<b>LDF Manifesto</b> Manifesto of Left Democratic Front included the following offers: A social security programme under the title “From Cradle to Grave,” employment for 25 lakh people, welfare programmes and pension for staff of religious institutes and places of worship, free education for all children. The manifesto also assured pension for all aged-people, right to service law, a law to monitor inter-state migrant laborers, and more opportunities for technology parks and technological development.
<b>13</b>	<b>UDF Manifesto</b> Major items in the manifesto of UDF were as follows: 36 lakhs of employment, pepper and horticulture boards, reconsideration of backdoor appointments, realization of Kochi Metro Project, loan for students to purchase computers, electricity for all by one year, and a control over lottery lobbies from other states.
<b>14</b>	<b>Antony against VS</b> Congress national leader A.K. Antony launched his election campaign by taking on V.S. Achuthanandan. Antony cited the mismatch between his words and deeds during the last five years he has been in office. He called upon Achuthanandan to come out with facts and figures of the action he had taken against sex racketeers, illegal liquor trade, quotation gangs, land mafia, etc.
<b>15</b>	<b>Sindhu Joy in Congress</b> Giving a rude shock to the CPI (M), its young leader Sindhu Joy quit party saying the party neglected her and kept her away from responsible roles. She later joined the Congress. She also quit as SFI vice president and the state committee membership of the DYFI. In reply, the CPI (M) expelled Sindhu from the party. Later, Sindhu hit out against V.S. Achuthanandan for calling her ‘oruthi’ (an insignificant woman).
<b>16</b>	<b>Jamaat-e-Islami’s Alliance</b> In a surprise move, the CPI (M) state secretary met Jamaat-e-Islami leaders in connection with the state polls. Many termed the move as seeking the Islamic organisation’s political support. In protest, Jamaat-e-Islami political secretary Hameed Vanimel resigned from his post. For long, the CPI (M) had held the view that the Jamaat was an extremely communal organisation. Soon, Jamaat extended support to the party and its partners in 124 of the total 140 constituencies.

(Muneer V, 2015)

The analysis of the content of the debates of the four channels gives some common insights. All four channels give a prominent slot for news and debates and dedicate most viewed slot, primetime, for the same. In the primetime, 8.30-9.00 pm is the common slot for the news and debate shows. Majority of the debate topics are the same. Out of the four channels under the purview of this study, on an average three take same topics each day. That is why

the debates of 36 days revolved round on 16 topics. The difference was only on perspectives and angles. Even, they are running behind the same panelists for discussions. It also shows that they all follow the same principles of news programming practice. During important newsbreak days they select two different topics for debates.

Further, the aggressive style of anchoring is another common feature of debate shows of Malayalam news channels. Almost all news presenters adopt a provoking style of interrogation. That is why it is criticized that such debate shows produce only 'heat' instead of 'light'. The judgmental style of such anchoring invites serious image/credibility crises as well, which is another topic of research in the same area that needs deep probe using different methodology. As Keralites/Malayalees are continuing as the so-called 'argumentative Indians', the interest of people in debates will grow and subsequently, the relevance of such research will also increase.

Based on the analysis conducted on the content of prime-time television debate programmes telecast on the four news channels in Malayalam during the crucial Assembly polls held in Kerala in 2011., the researcher identified the nature of the shows. The findings will help future researchers to conduct further studies on some areas like the bias and propaganda of debates, the perceived credibility of debates, issue priming and framing, and image engineering.

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