The Demographics of Malayalam Television Debates Viewership

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Abstract

Television is an indispensable media during election run-up. Television news performs different roles during elections. They hold a mirror to the past events and also present the current and future scenario of events. This research paper assesses the viewership of debate topics, prime-time news, and debate shows telecast by various news channels in Malayalam with the differences in demographic backgrounds of electorates. The data was collected through a survey conducted during the 2011 Kerala Assembly polls campaign period adopting the Before-and-after design. Having analysed the viewership of various news and debate shows among electorates, the paper identified that nine topics had high viewership among male, upper-aged, post-graduates and the unemployed. These demographic groups of viewers are found to evince high interest in matters of election than others.

Keywords

Television News, Television Debates, Prime Time, Malayalam News Channels, Viewership

1. Introduction

Mass media, particularly television, are a critical variable in political information and voting behaviour of people during elections. The factors that influence voting behaviour of media audience include the length and breadth of its campaign coverage, debates between candidates and their party leaders, their stances on electoral issues, the arguments and comments made by experts and party representatives, political leniency of news anchors, etc. Moreover, the demographic backgrounds of viewers, their political awareness, the political ecology of the time, and perspectives on candidates can also act as influential factors in formulating voting behaviour (Muneer V, 2015).

Television news and debates present an all-encompassing view of election-related issues in terms of their past and present. While preparing the background knowledge of such issues incorporating an analysis of stances made on them by various political parties, these news and debate shows demonstrate the capacity of such issues in influencing voting behaviour of electorates. News and debate shows are significant in countries like U.K and the U.S where candidates present their arguments in the form of debates in news shows. At the same time, in countries where there is no debates are held, the news programmes conduct debates over the public addresses made by the candidates as part of their campaign.

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Political analysts, experts, and representatives of various political parties participate in such debates.

Political debates usually refer to the presidential debates held in the countries like US where the contestants appear on live television news shows. When we go through the research reviews on debates, we would get a plenty of studies dealing with the debates held in presidential primaries and finals. These news channels also hold debates on matters of importance. Political parties, political analysts and experts attend the same as discussants and they are moderated by television anchors. Research studies covering these debates are very rare, perhaps because it is very difficult to separate them from newscasts. Therefore, it is highly relevant to analyse the nature and influence of news and debates, particularly in the poll run-up.

The core objective of this paper is to analyse the viewership of news bulletins and debate programmes telecast by four leading news channels in Kerala. The paper is also committed to assess the viewership of those debate shows in relation to the demographic backgrounds of the audience.

2. Studies on Televised Political News and Debates

Though studies exclusively dealing with news-based debates are rare, several communication and political communication scholars as well as political scientists had conducted studies on political news and debates. This unit has been divided into two categories: the first comprises research on political news and the latter deals with the studies conducted on televised political debates.

2.1. Televised Political News

One broad area of political communication that continues to grab intense attention from researchers is the interaction between news and politics. The conceptual focus of many of these research efforts has emphasized how 'reality is constructed' through various features of news content and presentation (Black, 1982; Nimmo & Combs, 1983; Jamieson & Campbell, 1988).

In their study (1973), McClure and Patterson attempted to identify the influence of television news programmes on the 1972 US presidential election. Their study analysed the content of such debate shows to establish the relationship between the viewership of such news programmes and voters' perceptional changes.

Stephanie Greco Larson (1999) conducted a study on public opinion moulded by mass media based on the contents of national evening television news telecasts at the time of the 1996 presidential polls. The work resorted more on the broader sense of public opinion than drawing a conclusion based on poll results.

As mentioned earlier, when the research on political debates is referred to, it usually refers to research on presidential debates. Although the purview of the present study is on news-based debates—panel discussions followed in the main news bulletins, particularly prime-time news bulletins—the reviews of all formats of debates including presidential debates are highly relevant in this context. The following segment makes such an effort.

2.2. Televised Political Debates

The capacity of debates on voting decision of electorates has been studied by Russel Middleton (1962). In order to establish his argument that the debates influence voting

decision, he analysed the Kennedy-Nixon debates and how they influenced the voters in Tallahassee and Florida.

George F. Bishop et al (1978) studied the influence of watching debates on the acquisition of political knowledge. The study probed into the possibility of voters developing political knowledge by watching the debates. Also, it examined if the act of watching debates educates the voters of candidates' stances on issues of relevance.

Apart from traditional presidential debate studies, some scholars have attempted to dissect other types of debates mainly panel discussions followed in the main news bulletins. In their study, B.L Page and R.Y Shapiro (1982) argue that political pundits and popular presidents could act as influential forces in moulding popular will and opinion. In another study, 37 televised political debates on issues in Denmark, held live before select viewers, were analysed by Charlette Jorgensen et al (1998). Opinion polls were held before and after each debate.

3. Study Design and Methodology

This research paper is a part of a larger study which attempts to identify the relationship between watching news bulletins and debate programmes telecast on four news channels in Kerala and voting behaviour. The study adopts the survey methodology utilizing Before-and-after design. The survey was conducted during 2011 Kerala Assembly polls campaign period. Official notification for the election was made by the Chief Election Commissioner on 19th of March, 2011. The campaign period is calculated from this date onwards. On April 13, 2011, two days before polling, the campaign came to a close. Being a longitudinal study utilizing before-and-after panel design, the 'before' data was collected on 19th and 20th of March, and the 'after' data was collected on 11th and 12th of April, 2011 from the paneled respondents. Two criteria were fixed for the inclusion of the sample. One was that respondent should be a registered voter in Kerala, and the other was that he/she should be a viewer of any of the Malayalam news channels.

The researcher categorised the population of Kerala into three areas for drawing purposive samples: South, Central, and North, to make the study more feasible concerning data collection. The study involved a multi-stage process. One assembly constituency was selected purposively from each zone. Further one panchayath was identified from each selected constituency. Out of each Panchayath, three wards were selected. As many as sixty registered voters were identified from each ward as sample respondents. Additionally, trained investigators located and contacted the heads of homes and then chose a respondent with a criterion that every next member should be from the opposite sex. A special care was also given to ensure differences in the demographic backgrounds of respondents. They should belong to various socio-economic categories. Having completed the multi-stage process of sampling, the researcher could include as many as 540 respondents in the panel.

The researcher, while analyzing data collected prior to the onset of 2011 election campaigns, identified and removed ten respondents as they had not furnished details in line with the directions given. Thus, the number of samples subject to analysis was reduced from 540 to 530. Moreover, ten more respondents were removed from sampling, because the investigators could not contact those respondents in the second phase of data collection despite repeated attempts. The second wave of data collection was carried out in two days during the interregnum. The researcher further disqualified 8 respondents as the questionnaires of second phase provided to them were incomplete. As a result, the effective sample size subjected to analysis was reduced to 512.

4. Viewership of Television News and Debate Programmes

This paper's primary goal is to analyse the viewership of Malayalam news channels' prime-time debates and news programmes. The paper is also committed to examining how many people watched those debate subjects in relation to the demographic backgrounds of the audience. In order to materialise the objectives, the study identified four television channels in Kerala and the nature of issues that were discussed in their news shows, along with keeping an account of viewership of each topic. The study also examined the relationship between different topics of those debates, their viewership and the demographic features of respondents.

The Table 1 indicates how many people watch the four television channels in Kerala and select news programmes telecast by them. News Hour programme of *Asianet News* had the highest viewership. As much as 77 per cent (3/4) of respondents watch the programme. *Counter Point*, the debate show and Prime Time News of *Manorama News* stand second with 66 percent of viewers. Almost three-fourth of the respondents watches them (77 percent). It was followed by *Indiavision*'s News Night with 50.6 percent. *People*'s News N Views was watched by only 27.7 percent.

Table 1: Most Often Watched News and Debate Shows on
Malayalam Television Channels

News and Debate Shows of Channels	N (N=512)	% (N=512)
Asianet News' **News Hour**	394	77.0
Manorama News' **Counter Point/Prime Time News**	341	66.6
Indiavision's **News Night**	259	50.6
People's **News N Views**	142	27.7

Note: This was a multiple-choice question. (Muneer V, 2014)

4.1. Viewership of Election Topics Debated During Campaigns

Election run-up is a good time for mass media, especially for television. Viewers give their precious time to get updated with the electioneering process. Political parties also make use of mass media platforms for propagating their ideas and perspectives so as to grab the attention of voters/viewers. Among the mass media, it is believed that as a medium television is the most sought-after one. Election campaign activities gained a momentum when the election dates were declared by the Chief Election Commissioner on 19 March 2011. Electioneering activities witnessed a surge after nomination procedures: political parties organized public meetings in which candidates addressed and interacted with the public, representatives of different parties and candidates were engrossed in door-to-door canvassing and organizing rallies etc. Television channels on the other hand conducted debates and election-oriented programmes to present the prospects of winning elections by different parties, especially the two leading political fronts LDF and UDF. Each political party came up with new allegations against others along with bringing out old controversies. Manifestos released by each party emphasized on developments and cleared the respective party's stance on various issues. Release of manifestos accelerated the campaign process. Debates were held on matters in manifestoes, and mostly these debates were rancorous.

Many times, party representatives lost their grounds in debates, and they failed to defend their parties, especially in matters of controversies.

The researcher watched all the debates held on the news programmes of the select four channels—either on the channels or their website— from 19 February to 10 April 2011 and a list of topics of those debates was prepared and identified 16 topics as most relevant. Viewership of these 16 topics among the sampled respondents was assessed. In the second phase of data collection held toward the end of election campaigns, the respondents were required to fill in data pertaining to the select 16 topics. Each topic carried one score in the questionnaire, and the range was thus from zero to sixteen. The score marked by respondents reciprocated with the viewership of the debate programmes and of the channels.

The subjects viewed by the voters differed from 2 to 16. It is shown in the table 2. The sample mean of 9.2597 suggests that the majority of people saw the debates on nine themes.

Table 2: Viewership of 16 Debated Topics

Sl. No.	Topics	Viewership (N=512)	
		Score	**%**
1	Rice at Rs.2 a kg scheme	443	86.5
2	Lottery scam	415	81.0
3	V.S Achuthanandan's candidature	411	80.3
4	Sindhu Joy in Congress	405	79.1
5	R. Balakrishna Pillai's mprisonment	396	77.3
6	Ice-cream case	393	76.7
7	Charges against V.S Achuthanandan's son	328	64.1
8	Central Govt. corruption cases	319	62.3
9	Antony against V.S Achuthanandan	286	55.9
10	Back-door appointments	249	48.6
11	UDF seat sharing	227	44.3
12	Rebel menace in UDF	210	41.0
13	LDF Manifesto	203	39.6
14	Congress' candidate list	189	36.9
15	UDF Manifesto	158	30.8
16	Jamaat-e-Islami's alliance	109	21.3
	Total Sample Score	**4741**	
	Sample Mean	**9.2597**	
	Range	**2 - 16**	

(Muneer V, 2015)

The t-test was performed on the collected data to identify the correlation and contrast between the two gender variables (male and female) and viewership of various debate topics. Whereas, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was made use to identify the same relationship between the viewership and other four variables viz income, occupation, gender, age and education of the respondents. At a confidence level of.05. the outcomes were considered significant.

The findings of data analysis show that (Table 3) income as a variable made no significant bearing on the viewership. At the same time, all other four variables influenced the score of the 16 debate topics that corresponded with the range of viewership. For example, the variable gender had a significant role in the viewership of debate topics.

Whereas male respondents marked a higher mean score of 9.9295, female respondents score was 8.2150. The statistic difference between the two variables is beyond 0.5. Therefore, it is inferred that men who responded saw more discussion topics than women.

Similarly, age as a variable also showed significant change in the viewership of debate topics. Age as a variable was categorized into three: the youngest (18-35), the middle (36-50) and the upper age group (above 50 years). The age group and the score of viewership of debate topics are found to be proportionate in the analysis. The youngest age group had a mean score of 8. 9279. At the same time, the middle age category's mean score was 9.0366. The increase in the age was proportionately reflected in the viewership as well. The upper age group had a mean score of 10.0143, which was the largest. The differences in age group thus are reflected in the viewership score. The more aged group here was found to be watching debate shows and election-related programmes on news channels.

When occupation as a variable was taken, viewership was different according to the differences in occupation. The highest score of viewership was marked by the respondents who were unemployed. The score was as high as 10.3659 among the unemployed. It was followed by the respondents who were either in government or private services. Then, the self-employed, home makers and students positioned in a descending range of score. Based on the statistically significant differences, it is inferred that occupation as a variable influenced the viewership of such debate topics.

Table 3: Television Debates Watched During Campaign by Socio-demographic Variables

Variables and Groups	Group Statistics				*t*-Test Results			
	N	Mean Score	Std Dev	Std Error Mean	df		T	Sig (2 tailed)
Gender Male Female Total	312 200 512	**9.9295** 8.2150 9.2598	3.24084 3.13815 3.30582	.18348 .22190	**510**		**5.913**	**.000**

Variables and Groups	Group Statistics				ANOVA Results				
	N	Mean Score	Std Dev	Std Error Mean	Between/Within group	Sum of squares	df	F	Sig
Age (in years) • 18 - 35 • 36 - 50 • > 51 Total	208 164 140 512	8.9279 9.0366 **10.0143** 9.2598	3.03117 3.26515 3.63236 3.30582	.21017 .25497 .30699 .14610	**Between Group** **Within Group** **Total**	110.781 5473.670 5584.451	2 509 511	**5.151**	**.006**
Education • SSLC and< • PDC/+2 • Graduate • PG and Above Total	190 129 135 58 512	9.2105 8.7507 9.2222 **10.6207** 9.2598	3.53335 2.92023 3.28194 3.10533 3.30582	.25634 .25711 .28246 .40775 .14610	**Between Group** **Within Group** **Total**	140.333 5444.118 5584.451	3 508 511	**4.365**	**.005**
Occupation • Unemployed • Homemaker • Student • Self-employed • Service-Govt/Pvt Total	41 94 56 162 159 512	**10.3659** 8.1277 7.8036 9.4074 10.0063 9.2598	3.08833 3.33516 2.96905 3.10391 3.32900 3.30582	.48232 .34400 .29676 .24387 .26401 .14610	**Between Group** **Within Group** **Total**	381.527 5202.924 5584.451	4 507 511	**9.249**	**.000**
Monthly Income (Rs) • < 15,000 • 15,001 - 35,000 • >35,001 Total	212 215 85 512	**9.5849** 9.1209 8.8000 9.2598	3.45826 3.09873 3.38343 3.30582	.23571 .21133 .36698 .14610	**Between Group** **Within Group** **Total**	44.524 5539.928 5584.451	2 509 511	2.045	.130

(Muneer V, 2015)

Having analysed the results of data shown in the tables, the study establishes that all select variables viz occupation, gender, age and education except income, can influence the viewership of the debate topics during elections. The study found that the groups of males, upper-aged, unemployed and postgraduates watch most debates.

5. Summary and Conclusion

As they are the most resorted means to educate and gather information, television and other media have a crucial role in influencing the voting decision of electorates. News and debate programmes telecast on television news channels present a comprehensive understanding about the past, present and future of political parties, candidates and stances of them on matters of people's interest. They also update the audience with the latest developments of election campaign. This paper is an outcome of a more extensive research study probing the dynamics of news and debates telecast during election time on the voting predisposition of the audience of select TV news channels in Kerala, which utilized survey methodology through Before-and-after design. The main objective of this research paper was to analyse the number of people who watch Malayalam news networks' prime-time news and discussion broadcasts. The paper is also committed to assess the viewership of those debate shows in relation to the demographic backgrounds of the audience.

The researcher had to ascertain that the respondents were regular viewers of debated topics and prime-time news programmes on the four Kerala news channels: Manorama News, Asianet News, People, and Indiavision. From the data collected, it was evident that the respondents were regular viewers of those programmes. The results showed that the News Hour show telecast by *Asianet News* had the highest viewership. Prime Time news bulletin/ Counter Point debate programme on *Manorama News* occupied second position in viewership. It was followed by *Indiavision*'s News Night. News N Views telecast by *People*'s had the lowest viewership.

The select four television networks in Kerala and their news bulletins during prime time and debate programmes were found to be focusing on 16 debate topics. Side by side, the news programmes covered debates held between the candidates and representatives of all political parties. Nevertheless, all such debates and prime time news programmes centred their focus on the two leading political fronts, ie. UDF and LDF, their manifestoes, controversies, candidature, etc. The study, based on the results of data analysis, found that most respondents watched debates with the nine topics out of the select 16 topics. The study also established that men, older people, post-graduate holders, and the unemployed watched many debates throughout the election campaign. Therefore, it can be stated that these groups of electorates evince greater interest in matters of election.

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