Rural Coverage in the Hindi and English Dailies

VIPUL MUDGAL

This study of three each of India's highest circulated English and Hindi dailies finds that they devote only a minuscule proportion of their total coverage (about 2%) to rural India's issues, crises and anxieties. Even this low count could be misleading because most rural news is not about the farmers/villagers or about their concerns related to land, livestock, resources or farming. The content analysis of 968 news items shows that 36% of the coverage goes to issues of violence, accidents, crime or disasters. Less than 28% is about agrarian themes while 15% is about hunger, suicides, malnutrition, distress migration, displacement, or farmers' movements. The English newspapers had more coverage of rural distress than the Hindi ones. The authoritative sources quoted most often in the routine news tend to belong to the establishment.

Vipul Mudgal (*vipul@csds.in*) is with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.

Are India's rural issues getting the media spotlight they deserve? A popular impression is that the State's new policy thrust and enhanced public expenditure on rural India have finally brought the neglected countryside into media limelight.[1] Some analysts say that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government is pushing a populist agenda while many others believe that the rights-based entitlement is an idea whose time has come. Where does the media fit into this scheme? Is the mainstream media alive to the issues, crises and anxieties of rural India?

The present study attempts to answer some of these questions by analysing the content of the newspapers' routine rural news coverage. It looks at how rural India and its burning issues of extreme rural poverty are covered and which themes take precedence over others and in what context. The study also attempts to examine if and how the newspapers' choices of sources and experts have a bearing on how a particular rural issue/crisis is defined or sought to be resolved.

The content analysis of India's top English and Hindi newspapers broadly examines how India's mainstream press mediates the political processes around rural India and what is the extent and proportion of its coverage of rural news in general and issues of agrarian crises, i e, malnutrition, farmers' suicides or extreme rural poverty, in particular. The study seeks to map the coverage of rural news, and tries to understand if there is a pattern in the selection of news items which merit premium space. It also looks at the elements which go into the construction of the routine rural news, their most frequent and authoritative primary definers, actors, and the attributions and characterisations.

Data Collection and Methodology

The scope of the study is confined to three each of English and Hindi newspapers with predominantly urban readerships. They were selected on the basis of the Indian Newspaper Survey II which was made public in November 2009. According to the survey the most read English and Hindi dailies were:
(1) *The Times of India*, (2) *Hindustan Times,* (3) *The Hindu,* (4) *Dainik Jagaran,* (5) *Dainik Bhaskar*, and (6) *Amar Ujala.*

All the newspapers selected for the study bring out multiple editions so where localisation through satellite editions is common, a huge range of variation is found in the form of area or city-specific supplements even within some specific editions.[2] To obviate this, the flagship editions of these dailies, brought out from the head offices, or the national editions were selected. For instance, the editions taken were the Mumbai edition of *The Times of India*, the Chennai edition of *The Hindu* and the Delhi edition of the *Hindustan Times.* Two out of the three Hindi newspapers

selected had their head offices in Delhi so it was decided to take the Delhi editions of all three for the sake of parity.

The time frame of the study was the year 2009. The days were selected to cover every month of the year and every day of the week evenly and thoroughly during the time period. Four newspapers were selected every month in such a way that at least three week days and one each of either Saturday or Sunday got covered over a total of 48 days. Hence, 48 copies each of all the six newspapers were obtained either from the newspaper files/libraries or were accessed in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library archives.[3] It was decided to study each and every news item about rural India in the entire newspaper including all pages and sections. Every news item was treated as a separate unit within the newspaper and its accompanying visuals, boxes or graphic elements were also included in the mapping exercise.

For content analysis an elaborate coding sheet was prepared on the basis of a pilot conducted on the same newspapers before embarking on data collection. The idea of the pilot was to have as many categories of elements to be studied as possible. Many new categories were added on the basis of the issues/topics covered in the news items about rural India. Two coders were trained through the pilot and between them all the news items were coded on the sheets. One coding sheet was used for each item studied.

Following are the categories each of which is divided into multiple subcategories: (1) name of the newspaper, (2) placement of the story, (3) display (positioning, size) of the story, (4) visuals (accompanying the story), (5) story type (author, etc), (6) likely origin of the story (forum), (7) primary themes, (8) rights-based themes, (9) story setting/Reference point, (10) primary source of the story, (11) secondary source, (12) story slant, and (13) overall remarks

These 13 heads of the coding sheet contained quantitative as well as qualitative information about the news items studied. The quantitative heads comprised the size, placement and display of the story while the qualitative heads looked at themes, sources or the setting in which the story has been written. Each question or head contained multiple choices of elements prepared on the basis of a pilot.[4] Some of these choices were later clubbed under their corresponding categories. For instance, the sections on themes and sources had 23 choices each which were initially coded. However, many individual themes were later clubbed under subcategories on the basis of similarities. The subcategories chosen were "agrarian" and "non-agrarian" themes or "extreme poverty" and "violence-related themes" in order to create a big picture of the media's selection of themes. A separate category was created for rights-based themes to check if the newspapers give importance to the new paradigm of rights-based development in India being carried out through the passage of constitutional acts like the Right to Education, Right to Information and debates and discussions over the proposed Food Security (Right to Food) Act.

In all, 968 news items in the six dailies were selected for coding. Each item was marked and then coded separately. (This study did not measure the length of the stories either in column centimetres or in volume. However, the relative size of the stories was determined on the basis of single/double column/half-a-page-or-more display and their importance in placement as first/second lead, etc.) The English newspapers had 395 items while the Hindi ones had 573 items. To get an average, the total number of all stories in the individual newspapers was counted to check the proportion of rural stories. The number varied between 100 and 200 stories approximately, depending on the day of the week and other such factors that determine the thickness of the issues. We also counted the average number of stories in issues of newspapers other than the 48 days picked up for content analysis just to check if there were significant variations in average number of news stories throughout the year, though such a variation was not found.

Specific observations about each story were later noted in the end to record specific peculiarities. The data was analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). The frequencies of all the variables were later cross-tabulated to study most consistent patterns. Wherever the numbers were very small, they were not included in broad observations. However, the small variables were clubbed with other similar variables for re-tabulation. For instance seven different types of story display which were recorded in the coding exercise were later clubbed into three categories, i e, high, medium and low priority displays. Similarly, themes like rural poverty, hunger/malnutrition and bonded labour/child labour were re-categorised under "extreme rural poverty" issues.

The coding sheet had a column for noting the story slant (pro-government/anti-government) or those without a slant. The idea was to capture only the manifest slants and not the latent ones. More refined research methods like semiotics or linguistics can lead to a more in-depth study of slants but here we simply noted the most obvious and visible slants.

Broad Results and Analysis

The content analysis reveals that the coverage by all these six dailies of rural issues continues to be almost negligible. On an average, the country's top circulation papers devoted about 2% editorial space of their national/flagship editions with predominantly urban readerships to the issues and concerns of two-thirds of India.[5] Out of a total number of between 100 and 200 news items per day, they used an average of a little over three items on rural themes. But even this low count of news items could be misleading because a large number of stories that have their origin in rural India are not about farmers/villagers or their concerns that are related to land, livestock, resources or farming (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Individual Newspapers' Coverage of Rural Stories

Paper	No of Rural Stories (Per Day)	Percentage of Day's News (Approximately)
The Times of India	1.97	2
Hindustan Times	2.93	1.76
The Hindu	3.38	2.2
Dainik Jagaran	1.85	1.3
Dainik Bhaskar	5.3	3.2
Amar Ujala	4.68	2.07

Table 2: Language-wise Rural Stories

Newspapers	Total Stories	No of Newspapers	Average Stories Per Day
All	968	287	3.3 (2.08%)
English	395	143	2.76 (1.92%)
Hindi	573	144	3.97 (2.24%)

Among the English newspapers *The Hindu* devotes the highest number of news items per day to rural issues (3.38 items/day)

followed by the *Hindustan Times* (3.08 items/day) and the *Times of India* (1.97 items/day) though all three devote around 2% of their daily news to rural issues. Similarly, the highest average number of rural news items is to be found in *Dainik Bhaskar* (5.39 items/day) followed by the *Amar Ujala* (4.10 items/day) and *Dainik Jagaran* (1.85 items/per day).

The biggest portion (36%) of this meagre news coverage goes to non-agrarian issues such as crime, general or, political (Naxalite-related) violence, accidents and disasters. This means that despite the fresh policy spotlight and an impressive increase in public expenditure, rural India's agrarian themes still do not make big news (see Tables 3 to 6). The most prominently displayed news items from rural India, such as the lead items or other front page news stories, also tend to be about violence, disaster, accidents or crime rather than about what is considered by many as significant rural issues like displacement, poverty, malnutrition or farmers' suicides. Almost as a rule, the stories about Naxalite-related violence tend to be about a specific incident without going into the causes for violence or the context in which the armed rebellion is taking place (Table 3).

Table 3: Non-agrarian Themes (35.8%)

1 Naxalite-related violence	13.7%
2 Other violence related themes	11.3%
3 Disasters/calamities	7.1%
4 Accident/crime	3.7%

Table 4: Farming Issues and Development Themes (28.4%)

1 Farming issues	14.2%
2 General development	10.1%
3 Rural environment issues	4.1%

Table 5: Rural Crises/Poverty Themes (14.9%)

1 Extreme rural poverty	6.3%
2 Farmers' movements/protests	4.9%
3 Agrarian distress	3.7%

Table 6: Political and Legal Themes (7.4%)

1 Political themes	4.0%
2 Law, justice and corruption	3.4%
3 Other themes	(Remaining 13.4%)
Total	100%

A lack of context or historicity is common to almost all violence-related stories. Perhaps due to reasons like space crunch or their attempt to include a larger number of stories the reports tend to give bare details of incidents of violence rather than their deeper causes or wider implications. The omission of context is particularly glaring when the cause of violence has an ostensible political connection with rural India's multiple crises.

As Table 4 shows less than a third of this sparse news coverage (28%) is devoted to the agrarian themes such as farm production, yield, irrigation, seeds, procurement, and general development-related issues. These issues are often brought into media focus by bureaucrats, authority figures and politicians. It is noteworthy that these agrarian themes almost always signify wider economic activity with huge implications for the country's trade, business and industry. So in a way, these stories are also about farm-related business or economic activities and not farmers per se.

Compared to the above two categories (non-agrarian and agrarian themes) the themes representing the issues of rural poverty get very little coverage. Less than one-sixth of the paltry rural news space (15%) is taken up by rural India's multiple crises, i e, hunger, malnutrition, farmers' suicides, bonded/child labour, distress migration, displacement, extreme rural poverty, and farmers' movements/protests. Even positive news items like the development schemes, meant for tackling the rural crises, rarely make it to the front pages or other high-priority slots in other news pages.

A still smaller proportion of themes were devoted to political and legal issues. The political themes are about issues ranging from ideologies to policies, criticisms by political parties/personalities about rural issues. The legal themes pertained to issues of law, justice and corruption including activities/orders or interventions of all levels of courts of law. The rest of the themes (other themes) comprised the remaining themes which came to 13.4% of all themes covered (see Table 6). These are about sundry areas of rural life not very significant for the study.

Most news items pertain to reporting of an event or happening in a predictable structure.[6] A routine rural story is a brief, single or double column item on the inside pages and is straight and matter of fact. Explanations or backgrounders or the likely causes of an incident are rare. A considerably large number of stories are displayed in the "briefs" sections which carry just a paragraph or two in a column so tagged.

The bulk of the news stories are generated by the newspapers' own reporters, mostly without naming or identifying the source. It is well known that the rural issues often dominate the proceedings of Parliament or state legislative assemblies but these are rarely reported. Only 3.4% of the news items studied pertained to parliamentary or assembly proceedings. More stories (8.1%) were inspired by farmers' protests and public meetings while a slightly larger number of stories (9.1%) originated from press conferences or press releases.

Establishment's Role in Defining Issues

Most of the prominent and authoritative sources quoted are often described by media scholars as the "primary definers" of the issues involved. These sources normally have a stake in the issues they try to promote or block. Much of the routine news coverage is a result of a regular interaction between media organisation and authoritative source organisations. Normally reporters on the beat generate news through regular and institutionalised interaction with government authorities. These sources tend to be mainstream politicians and bureaucrats, and sometimes the civil society activists and other alternative sources.

The importance of sources is considered to be quite central to the process of news making. The whole production process hinges heavily on the cognitive abilities of the reporters and of the sources he/she is quoting. Teun A Van Dijk (1988: 99) believes that the "…analysis of source text transformations into news texts must be explained in terms of social cognitions within social contexts." A large number of media scholars now believe that there is nothing casual or accidental about the way a reporter chooses or interacts with regular sources for the coverage of a beat. For Van Dijk (ibid), "All processes of understanding and of social effects and functions are controlled by social cognitions of individual group members and of entire group".[7]

Attribution of a story to a source works in two ways for the news organisations. First, it is about the news value of "detachment" as it gives the reader an idea of "who-is-saying-it" no matter whether the source is a witness, victim or an actor. Second, it shows that the journalist has done his/her job by quoting the

people who matter rather than using his or her own judgment. However, many sociologists who have studied news production believe that the news often tends to be what an authority figure (rather than an alternative source) tells a journalist.[8]

Besides these predictable trends the analysis of the English and Hindi newspapers' rural coverage also revealed some shocking aspects about their professional practices and reporting methods. The highest number of news stories (50%) had either unidentified sources or were without any sources at all. The trend applies to all newspapers though the Hindi ones tend to have more unnamed or unidentified sources (56%) as compared to the English (43%). It is noteworthy that in both English and Hindi newspapers it is common to have no attributions whatsoever (see Tables 7 to 10). More research is required to ascertain if the unnamed sources are a proxy for unofficial or unauthorised leaks by the same and most frequently quoted authority figures but that appears to be the case when versions suitable to authorities are mentioned without quoting or identifying sources.

Table 7: The Main Sources of all Stories (in %)

Unidentified sources	26
Without source	24
Government/bureaucrats	17
Government/establishment	11
Peoples' movements	10
Others	12*

*including opposition leaders, experts, academic institutions, reports, surveys.

Table 8: Main Sources for Extreme Rural Poverty Themes (in %)

Unidentified/unnamed sources	41
Government establishment	21.3
Academic/institution reports	21.3
Peoples' movements	11.5
Bureaucrats	1.6*

Table 9: Main Sources for Agrarian Distress Themes (in %)

Unidentified/unnamed sources	44.5
Peoples' movements	25
Academic/institution reports	8.3
Bureaucrats	8.3

Table 10: Main Sources for Naxalite Violence-Related Stories (in %)

Unidentified/unnamed sources	55.6
Government bureaucrats (and police)	33.8
Government/establishment	6.0
Opposition parties	2.3
Peoples' movements	0.8*
Academic/institution reports	0.0*

* It is important to note that peoples' movements and academic institutions are hardly ever quoted in stories relating to Naxalite violence even though many of them are known to have strong views on the subject.

It is not a part of the scope of this study to examine if this is a new trend or if it applies to rural reporting more than other type of news coverage. Once considered to be a reporter's best tool of objectivity, the (lack of) attributions is too glaring to have escaped the senior news managers' notice. It might be a fair guess at this stage that some of these unidentified sources could actually be official sources who do not want to be quoted.

After the unnamed or unidentified sources, the second highest number of stories (27%) quoted the government, establishment figures or bureaucrats as the main sources. This conforms to the global trend of media in liberal democracies as mentioned above. It is to be expected since more stories tend to be about non-agrarian themes like violence and disasters and general development related government policies and their implementation. (We have seen that over 65% rural news falls in these two categories. See Tables 3 and 4.)

The peoples' movements, alternative sources, experts and academic reports are quoted in only 15% of the news items which is again consistent with the kind of themes likely to have originated from such sources. (Themes about rural crises or extreme rural poverty constituted less than 15% of the news items. See Table 5.) It is clearly shown in Table 8 that academic institutions/reports and peoples' movements tend to be sources of news about extreme rural poverty.

It is also noteworthy that the civil society and peoples' movements are not among the top five sources of prominently displayed news stories. They are almost never quoted in front page stories but are often quoted in low and medium priority news stories in the inside pages. It could well be that the themes they seek to promote are considered to be less newsworthy than those promoted by more authoritative (read official) sources.

Tables 8 and 9 show that bureaucrats are not among the preferred sources when it comes to stories about extreme rural poverty or agrarian distress. However, the government establishment, particularly politicians are frequently quoted as sources of news in this category. A very high proportion of extreme rural poverty theme stories originate from the reports of academic and other institutions such as the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development agencies. It is equally noteworthy that the issues of agrarian distress are the only area where the peoples' movements are among the most quoted sources of news.

It is also clear from the study of stories about Naxalite violence-related issues that bureaucrats and the police are considered to be the most reliable sources by almost all the newspapers. Since most stories about violence cover the immediate incidents, mostly without the context, the requirement of bare details or the number of casualties, etc, is easily fulfilled by the official sources that also happen to be more easily accessible than the victims in far-flung areas or those connected with peoples' movements.

Difference between Hindi and English Dailies

There is very little difference in the choice of most preferred themes of the news items between the English and Hindi newspapers. All the six newspapers chose violence/accident-related news as the most important category of rural news. Like the issues of violence, crime and disaster, the issues of economic activity (farming and development, etc) seem to get importance in these predominantly urban editions. In sharp contrast, the issues of extreme rural poverty and agrarian distress are given less importance by both Hindi and English newspapers (see Tables 11 and 12).

Table 11: Top Five Themes in the English Newspapers' Coverage of Rural Themes (percentage)

1	Naxalite violence	14.4
2	Other violence-related themes	14.4
3	Farming issues	10.4
4	Extreme rural poverty	9.9
5	Development (general)	8.4

Table 12: Top Five Themes in the Top Hindi Newspapers' Coverage of Rural Themes (percentage)

1	Farming issues	16.8
2	Naxalite violence	13.3
3	Development (general)	11.3
4	Other violence-related themes	9.1
5	Disaster/calamities	8.8

Just like themes the choice of stories between Hindi and English newspapers too is without significant variation. Four out of five most frequent themes are common between the English and Hindi press. The most common rural stories that the urban readers are likely to read are about violence, farm business and

general development. While the broad trends remain consistent, the English newspapers have logged marginally more stories about environment and extreme rural poverty, including farmers' suicides, while the Hindi ones have scored higher on issues of farming and development. The themes representing extreme rural poverty are only 3.8% in the Hindi dailies as compared to almost 10% in the English ones. In the Hindi ones these themes are also not among the top five.

Story Slants

Most stories were straight reports of incidents and therefore without a manifest slant. Since the most frequent themes were non-agrarian issues, particularly about the Naxalite or general violence, there was no manifest slant. About 82% of the stories in the Hindi newspapers and 74% in the English ones (Table 13) were without a manifest slant. However, among the slanted stories, many more tended to be anti-government rather than pro-government in both the English and Hindi newspapers. The main sources of news in the

Table 13: Manifest Slants in Stories (percentage)

Papers	Pro-Government Slants	Anti-Government Slants	Others
English	9.4	16.5	74.2
Hindi	6.8	11.2	82.0

Table 14: Main Sources of Stories with Slant (percentage)

		Pro-Government Stories	Anti-Government Stories
1	Government/establishment	35.5	4.7
2	Bureaucracy	9.2	2.3
3	Experts/institutional reports	6.6	10.1
4	Opposition/regional parties	0.0	9.3
5	Unidentified/unnamed sources	44.7	51.4

pro-government stories were bureaucrats and the establishment personnel (almost 45%) while the experts, the institutional reports on rural India and opposition leaders were the sources for stories with anti-government slants (Table 14).

Conclusion

India's highest circulated English and Hindi newspapers devote only a minuscule proportion of their total coverage to rural India. Notwithstanding the fact that the recent rural schemes and programmes involve unprecedentedly large sums of public expenditure concerning two-thirds of Indians, the newspapers do not seem anxious to cover them. One reason for their lack of interest could be explained by the fact that their readers, advertisers and journalists, particularly in the metropolitan editions, come from urban backgrounds. The dailies tend to be more consumer-focused and try to fulfil the needs and aspirations of educated and upwardly mobile urban consumers whose universe often has limited space for issues of poverty and underdevelopment. It is reasonable to expect that their other editions, particularly from small towns and mofussil areas may have marginally better rural coverage. However, the glaring omission of rural news in metro editions assumes significance because of their disproportionate readership among the policy elites and opinion leaders.
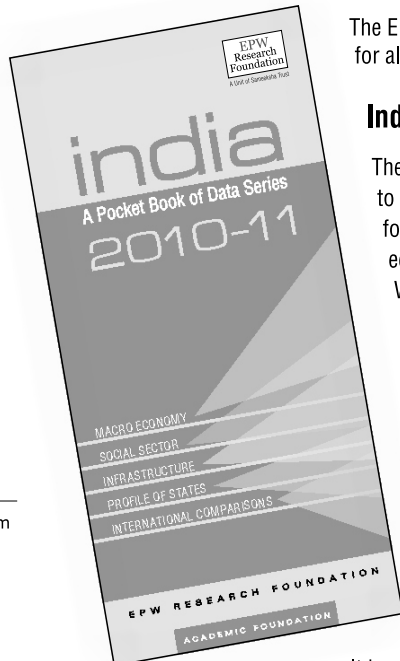
However, even this negligible proportion of about 2% of total stories packs a surprise for analysts. A large share of this tiny percentage is not so much about issues that are of consequence to the people living in rural areas. Chronic hunger, unemployment,

dismal living environment, health, education, gender discrimination and distress migration do not make news in the normal course. And when some of these themes do find a mention under the "development schemes" the real issues are defined by the official (establishment) sources who seem to have a stake in promoting the positive side.

The newspapers do pick up anti-government stories but these tend to get reported as isolated incidents or statements rather than in-depth analyses. Thus the anti-government stories tend to be small ones and news briefs rather than the well displayed authoritative stories. When it comes to the manifest slant of the routine stories, the anti-government ones tend to be more than the pro-government stories. However, the fact that the pro-government stories are better presented and displayed as compared to the larger number of smaller and without context anti-government stories could be wittingly or unwittingly fulfilling the purpose of mobilising support for policy issues that the ruling governments wish to promote.

There is very little difference between the Hindi and English newspapers when it comes to the selection of either themes or sources. All the ones studied by us preferred violence-related themes over extreme rural poverty and agrarian distress themes. This indicates that the priorities of the Hindi and English newspapers are determined by the same set of ideological judgments. The English papers tended to have comparatively greater coverage of extreme rural poverty issues like chronic hunger or farmers' suicides than the Hindi ones which had more stories on economic activities around rural areas.

A limitation of the study was that the content analysis was confined to mapping the newspapers' coverage of rural themes rather than going into the causes of news selection which require close, and preferably participatory, interaction with the beat reporters or newsrooms. Another limitation was that the newspapers studied were national or metro editions whereas their regional or local editions may have had better or more nuanced coverage of rural issues.

NOTES

1 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or MG-NREGS (launched in 2005) is the UPA government's flagship rural employment guarantee programme while the Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY) and the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), also launched in 2005, are aimed at giving new thrust to infrastructure and health. The other significant grass roots initiatives introduced during the UPA I and II regimes since 2004 include the Right to Information (RTI) Act, Right to Education (RTE) passed by Parliament in 2005 and 2009, Right to Food (or the Food Security Bill which is at drafting stage). Even though the effective implementation of most of these initiatives is at best uneven and patchy, they seem to have generated a new interest in rural politics, particularly at the levels of village panchayats and in areas of planning and programme implementation. And in this light, the media coverage of rural issues assumes fresh significance.

2 Satellite editions is a trade term for newspaper editions which are printed with a different city's dateline without significant changes in the content. Some satellite editions are distributed in a different city with very few changes while in many others an extra city (or area)-specific supplement is inserted.

3 Except for *The Hindu* which was not published on one of the days selected, i e, 29 September 2009. Hence, *The Hindu* was studied for 47 days while all the other papers for 48 days.

4 The pilot provided the range of elements available under each category. For instance, over 40 different types of themes were found in the stories which were subdivided into (Normal) Primary themes and Rights-based themes. Similarly more than 20 different sources and over 15 different types of story settings were found. Some more elements were added to the list during the early stages of data collection when some of the stories did not correspond to any element given on the list. The idea was to expand the list as much as possible in the beginning and then to cluster common elements under narrower themes at a later stage for the sake of simplicity.

5 According to the Census of India 2001, about 68% of the country's population resides in rural areas and only 32% in urban areas.

6 A normal news discourse employs skill sets which compose news items in a particular order. It carries bare skeletal details of an incident, policy statements or charges against individuals or institutions.

7 "It Is Meant as an Integration, as a Bridge between the Verbal and the Cognitive, between the Cognitive and the Social, and between the Micro-accounts and Macroaccounts of Newsmaking." Van Dijk, A Teun (1988: 98-100).

8 Tuchman 1978, Gans 1979, Fishman 1980, Glasgow University Media Group 1976, and Bell 1991, have explained through studies and examples how media in liberal democratic societies depend heavily on authority figures irrespective of how much (or how little) they know about the issues. Similarly Fowler (1991) and Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979) have explored ideological function of media's routine language. Building on the earlier literature on ideology and language use, the authors demonstrate how variations in types of discourses have social and economic factors embedded in them. The language of the news media in general is hence understood as part of a social process rather than something "reflexive" or "on-the-spot".

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