

DOCTORAL THESIS

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

The salient finding of this project is that the field of journalism has been subject to regular incursions from the field of power, particularly when political and economic interests are aligned, such that the field of journalism collapses in the field of power resulting in the need to

reassess Bourdieu's claim that fields, however heteronomous, possess a degree of autonomy.

This research finds that journalism is not merely embedded in the field of power, it plays a more pernicious role after economic liberalization. It becomes an active participant in negotiating and consolidating the dominant coalition of economic and political interests on which the polity rests. In other words, it is recruited by the field of power in institutionalizing crony capitalism.

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

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