The use of Priming and Framing Theories in Photographic Communication in the Press: A Case Study of the 2014 Indian Elections

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ABSTRACT: The paper underlines the role of photographic communication within political communication in affecting and influencing the mass perceptions of the crucial political events. This has not been well documented in media academia. Indian elections are decided by the voters after comprehensive campaigning by political parties and leaders using mass media. This provides a perfect platform to study how the photographs were used to campaign during the last election campaigning period. Content analysis and critical discourse analysis were the research methods used to collect the data that was analysed manually. The research paper highlights that priming and framing theories were at play in the way photographs were used in both the newspapers. This indicates the importance of having a comprehensive photographic communication strategy in place while pushing messages using mass media, especially the print medium. A broader study involving more newspapers would be helpful in ascertaining the precise strategies or theories that were at play during the 2014 elections campaign.

1.   INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyse the photographs used in the mass media during the 2014 election campaign to understand if any particular strategy was used or if any theory could be used to explain any patterns of the photographic communication that took place during the time. This paper will aim to determine the usage or application of priming and framing theories in the publishing of the theories during the campaign period.

This paper is a critical discourse analysis on the strategic use of agenda setting theory, encompassing priming and framing in the two national newspapers for effective political communication through impactful photographs. As India is a democracy, the general or the parliamentary elections hold utmost importance where the citizens of the country cast their votes to elect a ruling party and a Prime Minister of the country.[i] To appeal to the voters, the parties and their leaders are heavily involved in campaigning through mass media communication. While the impact of television, radio, the written word and the social media have been well documented, the role that photographs play in shaping the public opinion and getting the message across has been understudied.

The importance of visual symbols in political communication has been increasing with the increased consumption of visual media. The politicians understand the value of strategic images and visuals and spend plenty of resources and time on creating the perfect photographs and video bites. Photographs play a crucial role in constructing political images although there is not enough documented evidence of their impact and importance. This is because images have historically been overlooked when discussing political communication. As photographs of Narendra Modi and BJP were seen in abundance during the 2014 election campaign (from the news publications to the roadside billboards), it is only logical to consider the possibility of a strategy or theory that governed the publishing of the photographs in the mass media.

2.   THEORIES AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Photography, as a medium, is a fairly recent phenomenon. Over the last 200 years, photography has evolved from a crude process involving corrosive chemicals and convoluted cameras to simple and comprehensive way of creating and sharing images. Ever since, photographs have played a crucial role in communicating important messages that words often fail to do. So much had been written about the Vietnam War; however, it was Nick UT's photograph of the Napalm Girl that sensitised people all over the world regarding the devastating effects of the war.

Important photographs can leave a lasting impression on people, often taking iconic status: they can stir an entire country and they can end wars.When photographs are used in a strategic manner, they can not only augment the message, rather, they can influence the people into being receptive to that message, even if they wouldn't be otherwise.[ii] It is thus, photographs play a crucial role in political communication: whether it is sending out a message to the politicians or the citizens of the country.

The role of the media in shaping the public opinion is well known, and while the Hypodermic Needle/Magic Bullet theory suggests the function of mass media as the needles injecting information to the masses or a magic bullet being shot towards the passive recipients;the Agenda Setting Theory explains how the media can play an important role in setting agendas for the consumers of the media as to what to think about.Agenda Theory extends to include: priming and framing theories of communication. Framing Theory explains how the media can also influence the consumers in how to think about a subject.[iii]Priming Theory on the other hand, is used to strategize what are the prominent or prime issues of concern for the people by giving more media space and time to those issues and in context of print media, the strategic placement of those news items in the newspapers.

AGENDA SETTING THEORY

This theory of mass communication was introducedin 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw and has immensely contributed to the understanding of how mass media affects public opinion. The Agenda-setting theory suggests that the mass media influences public opinionpersuade by setting political agendas and making certain issues more salient over others by giving them more coverage in terms of time and space. [iv]

The theory rests on two basic assumptions. One, the media does not simply reflect reality as it is, but filters and moulds it. Two, the more light the media throws on a particular issue, the higher its importance will be in public opinion. Agenda-setting does not tell people how they should feel about certain issues, but determines which issues they think about.[v]

The theory is based on the cognitive principle of accessibility, which means the memories the brain accesses when asked to retrieve information. If a certain issue is highlighted enough times in the media, people are more likely to recall it quicker and more easily, as it is stored more prominently in their memories.

FRAMING THEORY

Framing Theory refers to the strategy of developing or activating an issue in the minds of the audience as to what issues to think about. In framing, the media tellspeople, what issues to think about, but also how to think, orient and re-orient their social and political opinions. Posited by Gregory Bateson in 1972 and attributed to Erving Goffman (1974), In many ways, Framing Theory is an extension of the Agenda-setting theory. While the agenda setting theory is used by mass media channels to tell the audience what issues to think about, framing theory is used to tell the people what issues to think about, but also how to think about those issues. In any situation, the media decides which matters get reported and which get ignored, and within a matter being reported, which issue is given more importance and which is being ignored. Because they have control over how the issue will be reported, they also have control over how it will be perceived by the audience. Media therefore exercises influence over public opinion by presenting facts in a manner that encourages intended perception.

Frames can be defined as a set of pre-conceived notions or ideas that are used to process any new information. For most people, these ideas are deep-rooted as they develop at a very early age. People tend to view information in a manner that does not contradict their worldview or 'frame'. Anything that does contradict the

frames through which they process information is often ignored or written off as an exception.Therefore, the news produced by the mass media is never neutral; it is framed in a particular manner to suit the political ideologies of the news media as well as its stakeholders. The reason why different media channels or newspapers provide varied versions of the same news is the framing of the issue in different ways.

PRIMING THEORY

Like the Framing Theory, Priming Theory also describes a way in which the media controls how the information that they report is perceived by their audiences. It has already been established that people view new information with the frame or filter of their pre-existing worldview. The media can emphasize a certain issue to be more relevant than it actually is, and draw a correlation between two pieces of information - a relation that may not have been considered by their audience before its introduction in the media.[vi] The human mind can, therefore, be 'primed' to look at information in a certain way.

The key motive of using priming theory is to activate a particular concept in the minds of the people through filtered news exposure. Priming has been recognized as one of the most powerful tools in political elections.[vii] For example, the charity work done by two candidates may not have been a consideration for audiences before, but because of the introduction of that variable by the media, it is now a factor that audiences will consider before they vote.

3.   METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. A case study was fashioned using one national and one regional English newspaper. Stratified Purposive Sampling was used to pick the appropriate sample for this study as this particular sampling method allows the researcher to pick samples within samples for the best results.[viii]The Times of India and The Tribune were picked as they were the most popular newspapers in their respective categories.

Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) were the primary research methods. Content Analysis involves systematic study or observation of the communication artefacts by assigning labels and codes to them to map interesting and meaningful patterns.[ix]CDA gives the researcher an insight into how any discourse is governed by social practices and how it affects the society.[x]

The data was collected using Descriptive, Inferential and Evaluative observation and then coded and tabled in Microsoft Excel. The data was coded under various categories and then those categories helped in establishing thematic patterns during the analysis of the data. Manual analysis of the data was performed as some of the data was perceptive in nature.

4.   FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

A statistical test was performed to check the validity of the data and ensure the credibility of the coders. Cronbach's Aplha reliability analysis was done on two data-sets compiled by the coders. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to perform the analysis. Table 1 lists the case processing summary and list-wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure. Table 2 summarises the results of the analysis.

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	1007	93.9
	Excluded[a]	65	6.1
	Total	1072	100.0

List-wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 1: Case processing summary for the Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.998	2

Table 2: Results for the Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis

NUMBER OF PHOTOGRAPHS PER LEADER

In the photographs prominently featuring political leaders, Narendra Modi appeared 68 times in The Times of India and 27 times in The Tribune, whereas Rajnath Singh appeared 10 and 4 times respectively, and ArunJaitley appeared 7 and 12 times respectively.

Amongst the INC leaders, Rahul Gandhi appeared the most, featuring 28 times in The Times of India and 8 times in The Tribune. Sonia Gandhi appeared 11 and 7 times, while Priyanka Gandhi appeared 29 and 2 times in the same newspapers respectively.

Arvind Kejriwal appeared 9 times in The Times of India, and 4 times in The Tribune. Figure 2 highlights the numerical advantage enjoyed by Narendra Modi over other political leaders during the campaigning months.

Number of photographs in TOI and the Tribune – political leader irrespective of party affiliation
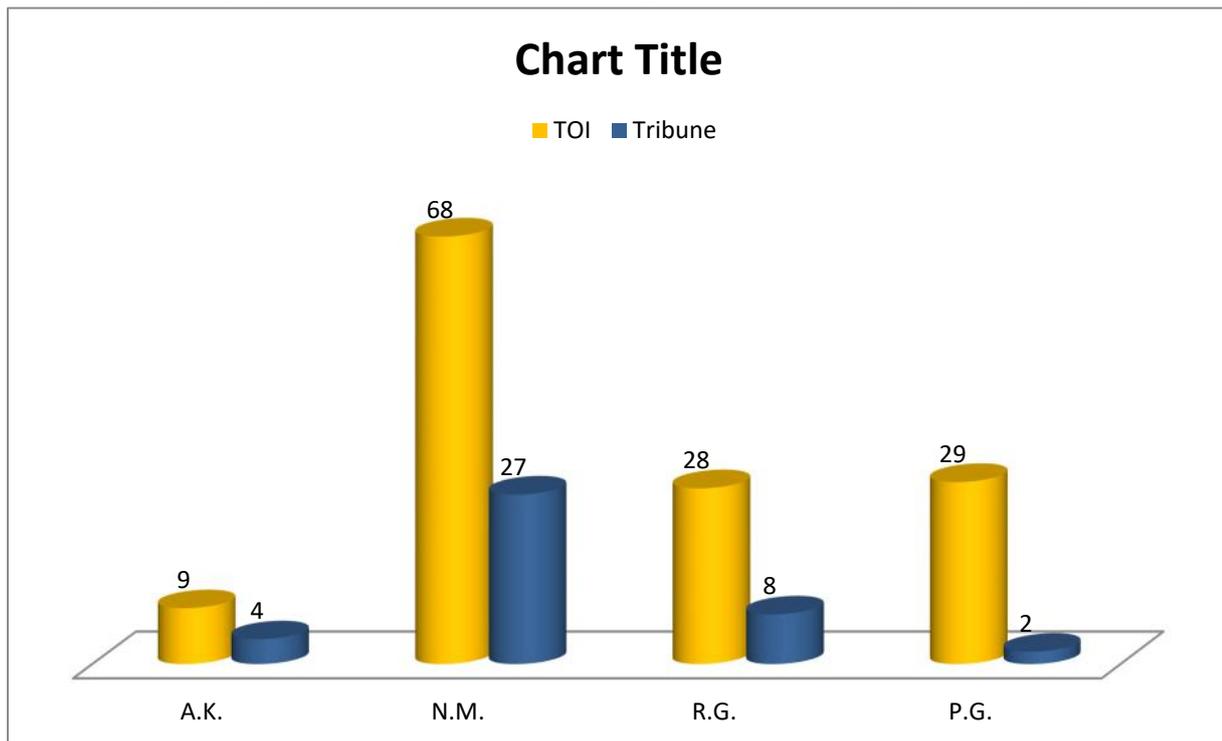

Figure 1: Representation of the comparison of number of pictures of political leaders that appeared in ToI and Tribune Photographs where the leaders can be seen interacting with the public

The Times of India and The Tribune carried 63 and 79 photos respectively where the leaders' interaction with the public was evident. Out of these, in The Times of India, Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi appeared in 10 photos each, while other leaders appeared in 43 photographs.

In The Tribune, Modi appeared 16 times, Rahul Gandhi 7 times and other leaders 56 times. It is clear that Narendra Modi had many more photographs published in the two newspapers than any other political leader during the relevant time.
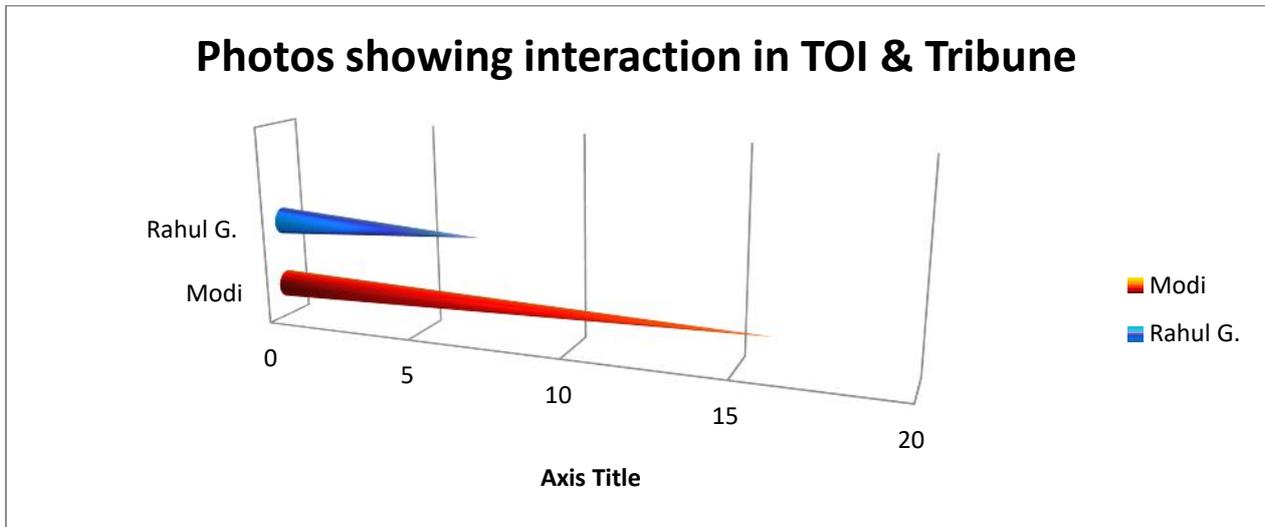
Figure 2: Representation of the difference between the number of pictures that appeared in ToI and Tribune for Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi where they appear to be interacting with the public (The horizontal axis represents the numbers of TOI and the vertical represents the numbers of the Tribune)

DATE-WISE FREQUENCY

In The Times of India, the BJP was featured in 5.6 photos daily on an average, from which Modi had 3 on an average. The Congress was featured in 4.3 photos on an average, per day, out of which Rahul Gandhi had 1.18 photos on an average, while Priyanka Gandhi had 1.3 photos on an average. Other political parties featured in 4.45 photos on an average daily.

In The Tribune, the BJP was featured in 2.3 photos daily on an average, from which Modi was in 1.2 photos on an average. The Congress was featured in 1.76 photos on an average, from which Rahul Gandhi was in 0.38 photos on an average, while Priyanka Gandhi was in 0.09 photos on an average. Other political parties featured in 6.09 photos on an average daily. Figure 7 depicts the distribution of the data-wise frequency of the photographs of political parties (BJP, INC and others) appearing in the newspapers.
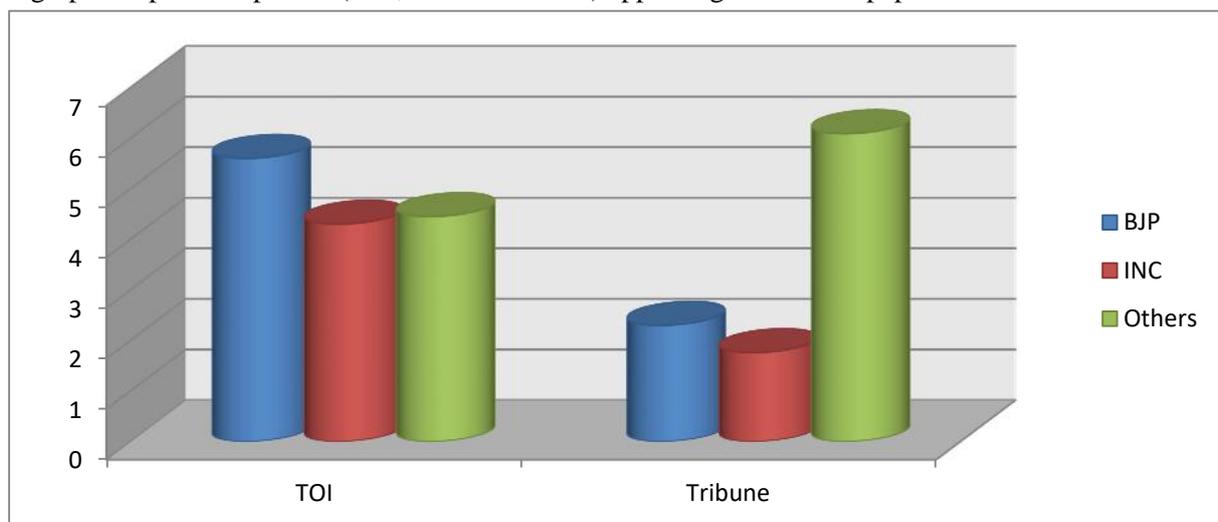

Figure 3: Distribution of the data-wise frequency of the photographs of political parties appearing in the newspapers

EMOTIONS VISIBLE IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS

In The Times of India, the majority of the photographs (i.e. 54) of Congress exhibited happiness, out of which Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi were in 17 and 26 respectively.17 depicted satisfaction, out of which Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi were in 3 and 1 photographs respectively. 8 photographs depicted anxiety, out of which Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi were in 3 and 1 photographs respectively.

In BJP's photographs, 50 exhibited happiness, out of which Narendra Modi was in 32. 21 exhibited satisfaction, out of which Modi featured in 8. 20 photographs depicted anxiety, out of which Modi was in 12. 15 of the photographs depicted anger, out of which Modi was in 8.

In photographs of other political parties, 25 depicted happiness, 17 depicted anxiety, and 11 depicted anger. Out of these, 6 of Arvind Kejriwal's photos exhibited happiness while 2 photographs of Akhilesh Yadav conveyed happiness.

In The Tribune, 23 of the photographs of Congress exhibited happiness, out of which 6 and 2 photographs featured Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi respectively. 13 photographs exhibited anxiety, out of which 2 photographs included Priyanka Gandhi.

33 of the photographs of BJP exhibited happiness, out of which 16 photographs featured Narendra Modi. 19 photographs exhibited anxiety, and 10 of these had Narendra Modi in them. In photographs of other political parties, 18 exhibited happiness and 13 portrayed anxiety.

5.   DISCUSSION

It is evident from the figures given above that agenda setting theory; priming theory and framing theory were at play as evident from the photo coverages by the two national newspapers Times of India and Tribune for political communication during 2014 elections.One of the most blatant communication strategies followed by the BJP during the election campaigning was that of the greater numbers. BJP held a greater number of rallies and BJP leaders made a greater number of public appearances as compared to the other parties or party leaders. Vociferous campaigning and wide coverage by the media ensured nation-wide recognition of the party and the leader. Modi's images in the print media and billboards across the country made sure that every citizen of the country recognised Modi, and well-crafted slogans and text messages regarding development and prosperity helped shape the public perception: people started looking at Modi as the harbinger of growth and better days.

The number of photographs was greater for both BJP as a party and Narendra Modi as the face of the party. This is indicative of the widespread media recognition enjoyed by the party and the party leaders. The media seemed to love Narendra Modi as he polarised opinions of media persons across the country; while some seemed to love him, some would love to hate him, however, everybody wanted to talk about him.[xi] This resulted in a campaign that was focussed purely on individuals, rather than issues at the ground level.[xii] Media outlets were also known to take content directly from the parties meaning that many of the photographs could have been sent by the parties directly. This highlights the possibility of priming by the media who seemed to carry an astounding number of stories regarding BJP and Narendra Modi.[xiii]

However, it was only when BJP made it easy for the media that it was possible. It was evident during the campaign that BJP was riding the Modi wave in the country: BJP organised numerous rallies where Modi was present. It was clear that BJP projected Narendra Modi as their prime candidate and asked people to vote for him rather than the political party. This argument is buttressed by the impressive share of the pictures Modi had of all the BJP leaders that appeared in the examined newspapers during the examination period: Modi was present in 68 photos out of 125 for all BJP leaders in the TOI, which is more than 54% of the photographs. At the same time, out of the 97 photographs for INC in the TOI, Rahul Gandhi appeared in 28 photographs only, while Priyanka Gandhi also had 29 photographs; Sonia Gandhi appeared in 11 of the 97 photographs.

This is a clear indication of how the INC failed to project a clear leader of their party. Rahul Gandhi had a 28% share in the photographs as compared to Modi's 54%. Even Priyanka Gandhi fared better with 29%. In other parties, Arvind Kejriwal appeared in 100% of the photographs of political leaders from AAP. This could

be argued along two different tangents: one that the Congress party failed to establish and project Rahul as a single party leader, or two that the media didn't find Rahul Gandhi newsworthy enough as compared to his sister, who had more photographs despite a lesser number of public appearances than him. In either case, INC failed to promote Rahul Gandhi as a strong leader who could lead the country and that worked in favour of the BJP.

Other than a greater number of photographs, the BJP and Narendra Modi also featured more regularly in both the newspapers. Add to this that Narendra Modi was seen interacting with the public a lot more than Rahul Gandhi or any other Congress leader, and it created an impression of a more public-oriented leader who cared for the people and their issues. The pictures that were picked by the newspapers for publishing were also remarkable as several photographs of BJP leaders projected anger, depicting the dissatisfaction and rage the BJP leaders had for the current situation. Indirectly, this pushed the message that BJP was angry at the current situation and wanted the change the people wanted as well. This is a typical example of the framing theory at work.

Thus, Narendra Modi as a charismatic harbinger of positive change and good days was manufactured by an effective media strategy that also involved strategic use of photographs with a certain tone, frequency and subject matter. Since BJP won the elections, it is a given - it can be argued – that the media strategy of the BJP or the strategy employed by the news media to project BJP and Narendra Modi worked well with the people, who were dreaming of the "Ache Din" long before the voting even started. At the same time, a greater number of photographs with certain emotions framed the context for the people: how to think about it.

6.   CONCLUSION

News media is known to use a number of mass media theories to interact with their news consumers and the context and the need of the hour determines what theory will be at play. While sometimes the media will give people what they want, often they will give people the various subjects to think about and tell them how to think about certain things. In the present discourse, Agenda setting theory teamed with framing and priming was analysed in the context of political communication in India during 2014 elections. However, it is difficult to ascertain if it was a deliberate strategy on the part of the news organisation or the political parties to employ these theories to persuade public opinion or a combination of both.

This research paper holds importance in developing an understanding about how political parties and news media use visual communication to push messages of critical importance that can affect critical change. A well-devised photographic communication plan can go a long way to create the impact that is desired. A broader study involving more publications would definitely provide more conclusive results that would be pivotal in understanding the role photographs can play in affecting decisive decisions and moments.

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