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Analysing the Media Coverage of Amritpal Singh's Arrest: How Media Channels Build Perception

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ABSTRACT: Media plays a paramount role in building, creating and setting perception amongst people. It has the capacity to direct information flow, construct narratives, and provide discussion topics for the public. One such public discourse stemmed from the incident of the arrest of Amritpal Singh, a controversial figure in Indian politics and the head of "Punjab De Waris" organisation.

After his shocking arrest, a statewide internet shutdown was imposed to maintain safety and security. News channels fervently aired debates, deiminated information and reports which formed an image in the minds of the public. This study aims at assessing how media channels build perception using the Agenda Setting theory wherein survey method was used to analyse the extent of perception building in public.

KEYWORDS: Media, Media Perception, Agenda Setting Theory, Amritpal Singh, Indian Politics

I. INTRODUCTION

The media, which includes social media platforms, alternative news sources, and traditional news agencies, has a complicated and multidimensional role in influencing how the public views political problems. This power stems from the media's capacity to direct information flow, construct narratives, and provide discussion topics for the public.

With the growth of the Indian media sector, news is no longer just about educating the public and empowering individuals; it is instead a commodity to be consumed by readers and viewers and marketed with the intention of making money through increasing circulation and ratings. The public's obsession, not necessity, determines news most of the time. Sensational, political, and crime reporting have received too much attention in Indian journalism because of this circumstance.

First, media organizations are free to decide which stories to report on and which to pass over. The way in which editorial decisions are made has a big influence on the information that the public is given concerning political matters. A news agency might, for instance, give some issues more weight than others depending on how important or relevant they are seen to be, while ignoring other subjects that might be just as important but less eye-catching.

Second, the public's perception of political issues can be influenced by the framing of such issues by media outlets. The term "framing" describes how information is presented, highlighting some details while downplaying or leaving out others. For example, a news article regarding immigration policy could be presented as either a humanitarian issue, emphasizing the predicament of refugees and asylum seekers, or as a national security issue, focusing on border control and crime rates. Media sources have the power to sway public opinion and mold attitudes toward political problems through the framing they choose. Furthermore, how political topics are portrayed to the public can also be influenced by the language and tone of media coverage. Since language employed in media channels affects how people interpret and comprehend information, it is important in determining how the public views political figures. When describing such individuals, media outlets frequently employ linguistic devices and communicate antagonistic or divisive themes, which can exacerbate public perceptions.

Sensational or aggressive language in a news report has the potential to stir up strong emotions and divide viewers, whereas a more objective or balanced approach might promote a better understanding of the complexity involved. To influence public opinion, media sources may also use persuasive strategies like expert opinions, sound bites, and imagery. Social media platforms have increased the media's impact on how the public views political problems. People are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and opinions, many of which are catered to their personal interests and beliefs, thanks to the growth of user-generated content and algorithmic curation. Personalized content can, however,



also produce echo chambers and filter bubbles, which stifle exposure to different viewpoints and reinforce preexisting biases.

Moreover, political, economic, or ideological prejudices or agendas of media outlets may affect the information they convey to the public. This can be shown more explicitly through editorial endorsements and opinion pieces, or more subtly through the choice of sources and experts cited in news reports.

Examining the media's fascinating portrayal of the arrest of Amritpal Singh, the leader of the separatist Khalistani pressure group 'Waris Punjab De,' founded by actor and activist Deep Sidhu, the study attempts to analyse the narratives offered by a few Indian news outlets that have contributed to the formation of public opinion.

Arrests of people, particularly well-known public figures, frequently become the centre of media attention. Amritpal Singh, a well-known individual in his community, was arrested on March 18, 2023, sparking a media frenzy and a days-long manhunt that also resulted in the state of Punjab shutting down the internet. The incident was widely covered by news outlets, each of which presented its own version of events and interpretation of them.

Who is Amritpal Singh?

Amritpal Singh is a self-described Sikh preacher and an alleged extremist "pro-Khalistan separatist." He was named the leader of "Waris Punjab De" (Heirs of Punjab), an organization started by actor and activist Deep Sidhu, who was detained in relation to violence during a farmer protest. The 30-year-old escaped capture in Punjab on March 18, 2023, and has been missing for almost a month. He and his allies had been charged with assaulting police officers and trying at murder. Following a protracted manhunt, Amritpal Singh was eventually taken into custody from Rode village in the Moga district of Punjab.

The strict National Security Act (NSA), which permits people to be held without being charged for up to a year, was the reason behind his arrest. He was brought to the Assamese state's high-security Dibrugarh jail, where some of his supporters had already been detained.

After hundreds of his fans stormed a police station in February 2023 to demand the release of an arrested aide, Singh quickly gained notoriety. His campaign brought back memories of the separatist uprising in Punjab in the 1980s and the ensuing crackdown that claimed hundreds of lives.

Singh claims to take inspiration from Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a preacher charged by the Indian government with organizing an armed rebellion in the 1980s, and he says he supports the Khalistan movement for a separate Sikh nation. The Sikh religion's holiest site, the Golden Temple, was stormed by the Indian army in 1984, killing Bhindranwale.

The Arrest:

Many regions of northern India, including the nation's capital Delhi and the states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, were involved in the manhunt for Amritpal Singh. At India's request, Nepal has added him to its list of people under surveillance.

On March 18, dozens of police officers were sent to check cars and set up traffic blockades throughout the state to apprehend Amritpal Singh. However, he managed to flee in a dramatic automobile pursuit that was captured on camera and shared live by some of his associates. Soon after Singh made his getaway, the government of Punjab, home to 27 million people, shut down internet access, imposed travel restrictions, and detained hundreds of Amritpal's supporters. Later, many of them were set free. The highest temporal seat of the Sikhs, Akal Takht, had requested that Singh turn himself in to the authorities and assist in their investigation.

However, it also questioned the government's detentions and arrests of individuals for their purported support of Khalistan and Singh after the crackdown.

Sikh organizations in Canada also staged large-scale demonstrations against the Punjabi government's actions. Demonstrators also took down the Indian flag during protests outside the Indian High Commission in London. India protested the event by calling the UK's deputy high commissioner in New Delhi and vehemently denouncing it. Pro-Khalistan protestors in San Francisco damaged the Indian consulate while demanding the release of Singh. Just a few weeks following his apprehension, Singh made public a video describing the crackdown as an "attack on the Sikh community" from an unidentified location. He has also referred to the NSA's use against him and his allies as "unfair".



What is the Khalistani Movement?

The Khalistani movement is a political and separatist movement that is mainly composed of Sikhs who support the establishment of an independent Sikh state in Punjab, India, which they refer to as Khalistan. The word "Khalistan" is derived from the Punjabi word "Khalis," which means pure, and the Persian word "istan," which denotes a region or territory.

The Khalistani movement has its origins in the early 20th century, but it really took off in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in response to Sikhs' perceived marginalization in India on the political, economic, and social fronts.

The movement peaked in the 1980s with violent clashes between Indian security forces and Sikh militants. One of the most significant events of the movement was Operation Blue Star, which saw the Indian Army invade Amritsar's Golden Temple complex, one of Sikhism's holiest sites, to drive out militants under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. This action increased a sense of estrangement and animosity among Sikhs worldwide and caused significant indignation.

But in the 1990s, the movement suffered a great deal because of dissension within the leadership, repression by the government, and waning public support. Although some Sikhs continue to want Khalistan, the movement is far weaker now than it was at its height in the 1980s. It is still a topic of political discussion and dispute in India today, with some calling for Punjab to have more autonomy within the country's federal structure and others still pursuing complete independence.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study is descriptive cum exploratory. This study's research design blends quantitative survey sampling with qualitative thematic analysis. A thorough investigation of the study questions is made possible by the mixed-methods technique, which examines both textual and numerical data.

For Achieving the research objective to analyze the public perception, survey method was used in which a questionnaire was framed to collect data which recorded the opinions of the respondents based on their experience of the various news channels they watch.

Second research objective of thematic analysis of news channels, CNN and NDTV were chosen through the purposive sampling method because of their vast viewership.

Language plays a paramount role in shaping public perception. Both CNN and NDTV employ tactics and tools to present and portray a story. These are:

Syntactic Structures:

- Both CNN and NDTV employ various syntactic structures, with activation being the most frequently used structure. Activation involves highlighting the subject of a sentence as the doer of the action, which can influence the perception of events in the crisis.

Lexical Choices:

CNN and NDTV utilize over wording and metaphor in their news reports on the arrest of Amritpal Singh. The use of specific words and metaphors can shape the audience's understanding and emotional response to the conflict.

Rhetorical Strategies:

- Direct and indirect manifest intertextuality are commonly used by both channels in their reporting. Speech acts, particularly assertive representatives, are prevalent in the news reports, influencing the tone and credibility of the information presented.

Impact on Ideology:

- These microstructures contribute to the overall ideological stance of the news channels towards the Amritpal Singh arrest coverage. The choice of syntactic, lexical, and rhetorical elements can shape the narrative, emphasizing themes like manipulation, political news, crimes, etc.

Selection of the Sample: Convenience sampling was used to select 100 participants, belonging to diverse background and ideologies.

Distribution of the Survey: In order to reach as many people as possible, the survey will be distributed online via social media platforms.

Before becoming a part of the survey, participants were duly informed using google form regarding the study and asked to grant their respective consent.

Questionnaire: To garner information on participant's opinions about Amritpal Singh, Separatist ideology, its relevance, a structured questionnaire was created using Google Forms.

Types of Questions: A multiple-choice, close ended questionnaire was included in the survey to collect a variety of quantitative data on perception of Amritpal Singh, the media's bias, understanding and their experiences based on the various news channels they watch.

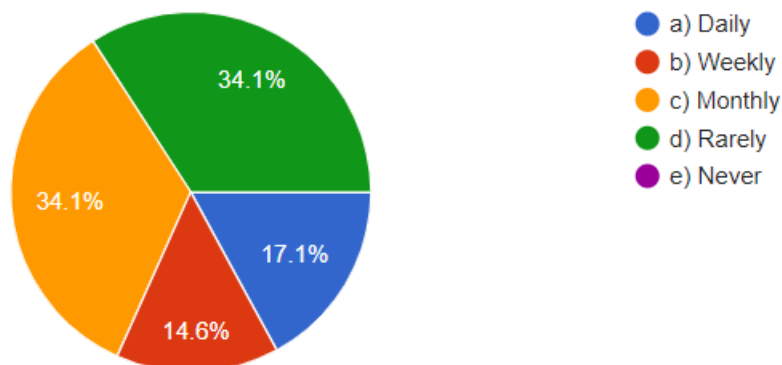
Descriptive statistics was used to examine the data in order to compile participant responses and find general trends and patterns.

III. RESULT

The data analyzed in this survey pertains to respondents' perspectives on media narratives and their influence on perceptions, particularly in the context of Amritpal Singh who is portrayed as a controversial separatist figure. The aim of the survey was to understand how media channels shape societal attitudes, consumption patterns, biased behaviour, impact outcomes, and perceptions among 100 participants.

Consumption Patterns:

The data regarding how frequently respondents witness media describing and portraying an image of an individual like Amritpal Singh reveals several notable trends:

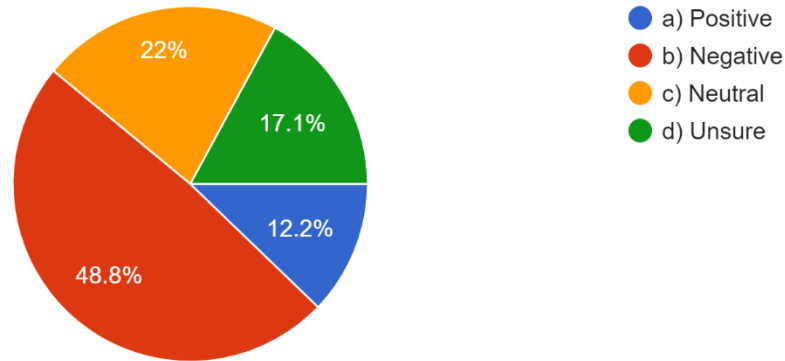


Monthly Occurrences: A significant portion of respondents (34.1%) reported encountering media depictions of individuals resembling Amritpal Singh on a monthly basis. This suggests that such portrayals are relatively common occurrences within the media landscape, occurring with a regular frequency.

However, an equal percentage (34.1%) indicated that they rarely come across media descriptions or portrayals of individuals akin to Amritpal Singh. This suggests that there is a high contrast.



Inference of Amritpal Singh's personality based on media portrayal:

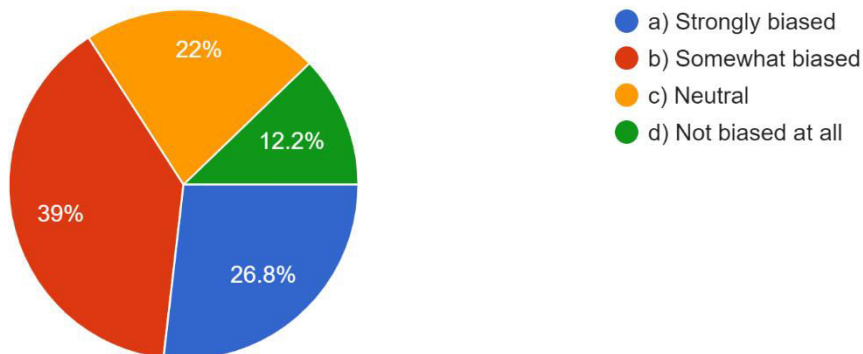


Data regarding respondents' inferences of Amritpal Singh's personality based on media portrayal provides insights into the prevailing perceptions:

A significant majority of respondents (48.8%) inferred a negative personality portrayal of Amritpal Singh based on media representations. This suggests that the predominant media narratives surrounding Amritpal Singh are unfavourable, potentially depicting him in a critical or harsh light. The majority of the respondents were accustomed to hearing words like “Khalistani”, “Anti-national”, “Threat”, “separatist” frequently. The tone and tenor while using these terms clearly cast negative aspersions on the individual.

A notable proportion of respondents (22%) adopted a neutral stance regarding Amritpal Singh's personality despite the portrayal in the media. This indicates a segment of respondents who did not perceive Amritpal Singh's personality in either a positive or negative light, possibly due to limited information or ambiguity in media depictions. A smaller but still noteworthy percentage of respondents (12.2%) inferred a positive portrayal of Amritpal Singh's personality in the media. This suggests that a minority of respondents perceived Amritpal Singh's personality in a favourable or positive light, despite potential negative portrayals. However, a minority of respondents (17.1%) expressed uncertainty regarding their inference of Amritpal Singh's personality based on media portrayal. This indicates a degree of ambiguity or lack of clarity in media representations, leading to uncertainty among some respondents even if they are infrequent.

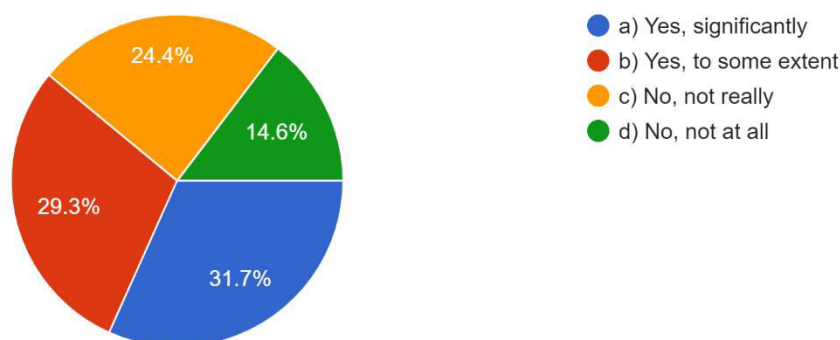
Biased Behaviour:



The data concerning respondents' perceptions of biased behaviour in media depictions of Amritpal Singh, influenced by political factors, reveals significant insights:

Somewhat Biased Perception: The majority of respondents (39%) perceived media depictions of Amritpal Singh to be somewhat biased by political influence. This suggests that there is a prevailing perception among respondents that media narratives surrounding Amritpal Singh are influenced to some extent by political agendas or biases. These could be the biases due to respective media channel's ideology or influence of a party or front. A substantial proportion of respondents (26.8%) indicated a perception of strong bias in media depictions of Amritpal Singh, further emphasizing the perceived influence of political factors on media portrayals. This suggests that a significant segment of respondents believes that media narratives concerning Amritpal Singh are heavily influenced by political interests or agendas. A notable percentage of respondents (22%) maintained a neutral stance on the bias of media depictions of Amritpal Singh, indicating a segment of respondents who did not perceive significant bias or political influence in media narratives. This suggests a degree of variability in perceptions among respondents regarding the extent of bias in media portrayals. A minority of respondents (12.2%) believed that media depictions of Amritpal Singh are not biased at all by political influence. This suggests a contrasting viewpoint within the sample, with some respondents perceiving media narratives surrounding Amritpal Singh as relatively unbiased or unaffected by political factors.

Role of Media Literacy:



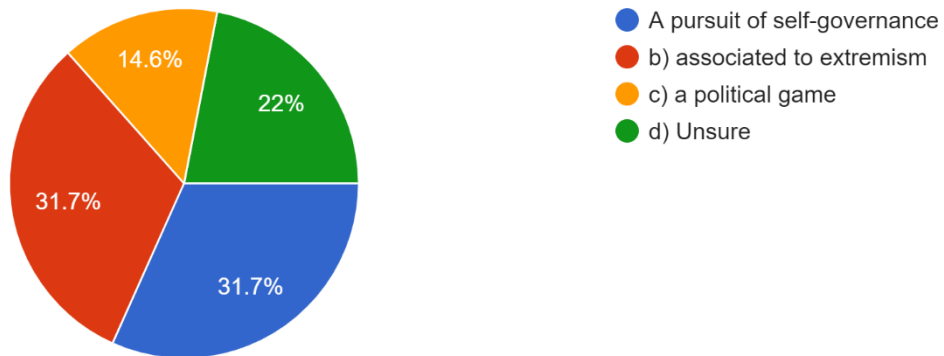
The interpretation of these responses highlights the significant influence of media portrayals on individual perceptions of individuals associated with separatist ideologies, such as Amritpal Singh, with varying degrees of impact based on media literacy:

Yes, greatly - 31.7%: This suggests that a notable portion of respondents strongly acknowledge the impact of media portrayals on their views of individuals linked with separatist ideologies. These individuals may possess a high level of media literacy, recognizing and critically engaging with the narratives presented by media outlets.

The portion representing 29.3% also acknowledges the influence of media portrayals, albeit to a lesser extent compared to the first group. They may demonstrate a moderate level of media literacy, being aware of the potential influence of media narratives but perhaps not critically analysing them as deeply as the first group. This segment of 24.4% respondents indicates that media portrayals have not significantly impacted their views of individuals associated with separatist ideologies. They may exhibit a moderate to high level of media literacy, actively questioning or seeking alternative sources of information beyond mainstream media narratives. Lastly, 14.6% the minority of respondents in this category suggests that media portrayals have had no impact on their views of individuals linked with separatist ideologies. They may possess a high level of media literacy, critically analysing media content and forming their opinions based on a diverse range of sources outside traditional media channels.

Perceptions of Separatism:

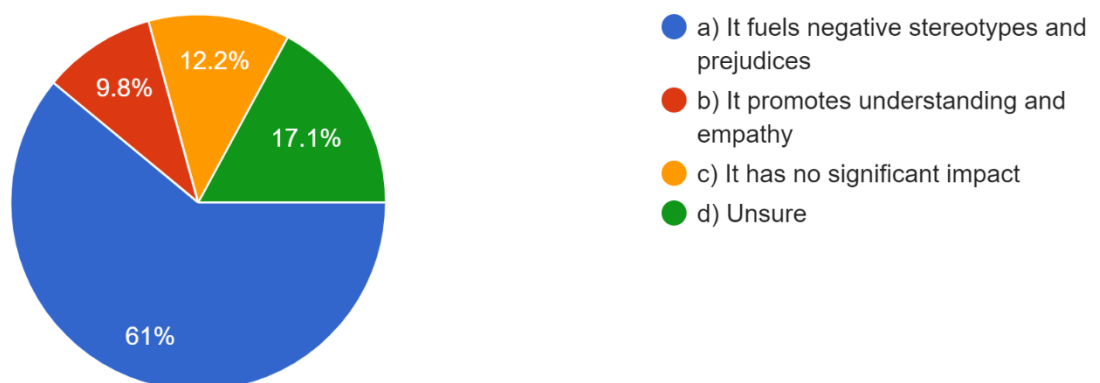
The responses to the perceptions of separatism question provide interesting insights into how individuals define separatism based on their understanding from media and other sources:



The pursuit of self-governance at 31.7% indicates a substantial number of participants perceiving separatism as a movement striving for self-rule or independence from a larger political entity. This interpretation resonates with the concept of separatism as a quest for political autonomy or sovereignty. The association with extremism at 31.7% is similarly noted by another significant portion of respondents. This perspective implies a belief that separatist movements are frequently connected to radical or extreme ideologies, potentially suggesting inclinations towards violence or militant actions. The perception of separatism as a political game at 14.6% is held by a minority of participants. This viewpoint may reflect skepticism or distrust towards separatist movements, viewing them as strategic manoeuvres used by political figures for personal benefit or tactical advantage. A level of uncertainty at 22% was expressed by a considerable number of respondents regarding the definition of separatism derived from media and various sources. This uncertainty indicates a lack of clarity or conflicting information surrounding separatism, underscoring the intricacy of the issue and the necessity for further learning or investigation.

The Impact

The responses to the question on the impact of media portrayal of individuals like Amritpal Singh on public discourse and societal attitudes towards separatism provide valuable insights:



61%: The majority of survey participants perceive that the depiction of individuals such as Amritpal Singh in the media contributes to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with separatism. This indicates that media representations may perpetuate biased or stigmatizing narratives, potentially influencing public perceptions in an adverse manner. 9.8%: A small percentage of respondents believe that media portrayal of individuals like Amritpal Singh fosters understanding and empathy towards separatism. This viewpoint suggests that media representations can serve as a platform for nuanced discussion and empathy-building, potentially challenging stereotypes and promoting

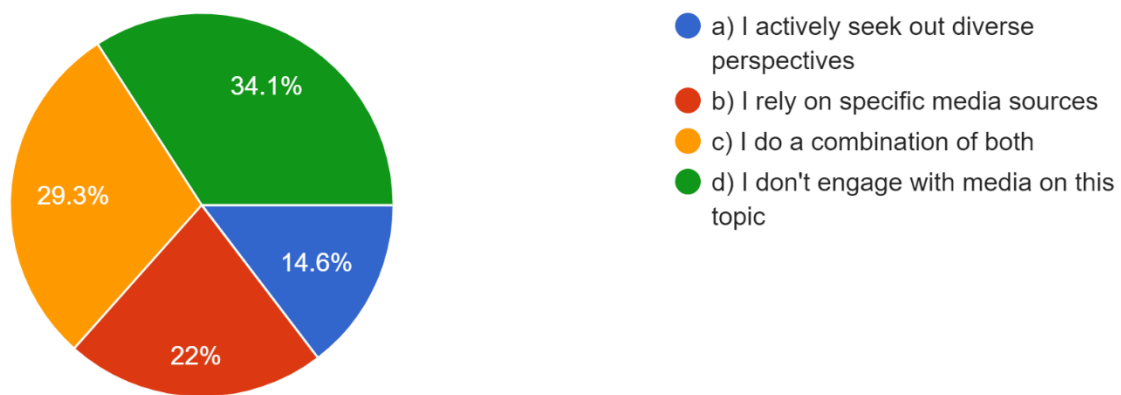


dialogue. A notable minority of respondents 12.2% perceive that media portrayal of individuals like Amritpal Singh has no significant impact on public discourse and societal attitudes towards separatism. This viewpoint may indicate skepticism towards the influence of media narratives or a belief in the resilience of public opinion against media bias. Lastly, 17.1% a significant proportion of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the impact of media portrayal on public discourse and societal attitudes towards separatism. This suggests a recognition of the complexity of the issue and a need for further exploration or information to form a definitive opinion.

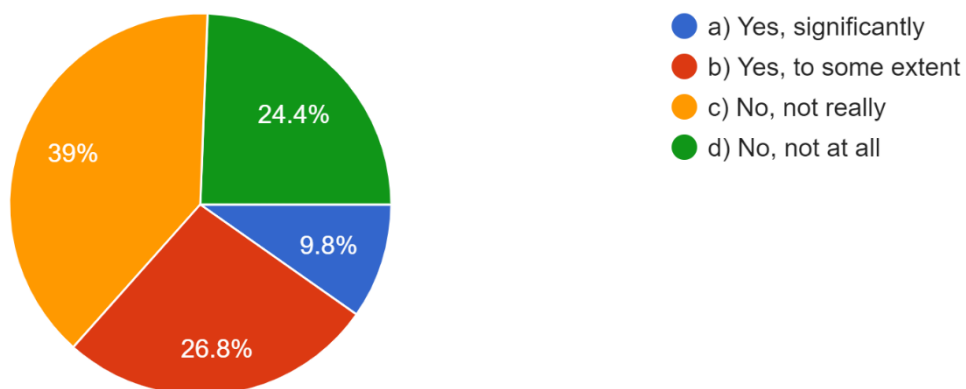
Media Engagement and Attitude:

The responses to the question on media engagement and attitudes towards seeking diverse perspectives on issues related to separatism provide insights into how individuals approach information consumption:

A majority of the respondents (34.1) reverted with the response that they actively do not wish to engage with media on the controversial topic of Amritpal Singh and his arrest. While others do infact rely on other sources and seek out information to better understand the situation and discourse around such a burning issue.



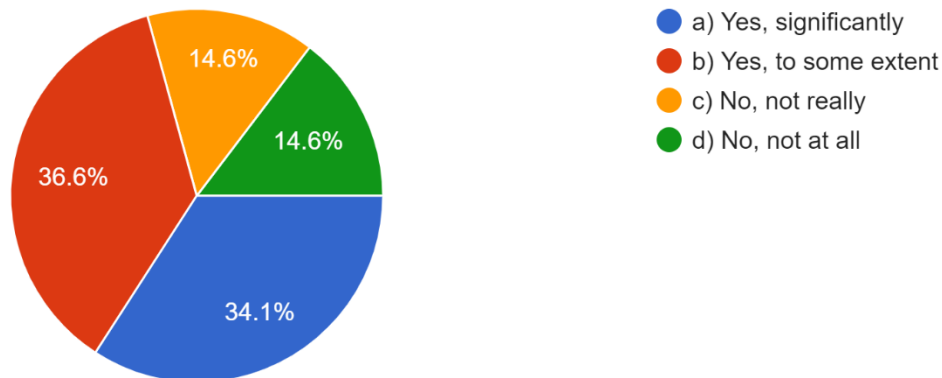
Is Amritpal Singh important in keeping youth involved in political decision-making and keeping a check on the actual practice of democracy?



The 39% which constitutes the majority of respondents indicate a belief that individuals like Amritpal Singh are not particularly important in keeping youth involved in political decision-making and overseeing the practice of democracy. This suggests a skepticism or lack of recognition of the significance of such individuals in influencing political participation among the youth demographic. And despite the narrative in the mainstream media channels, individuals like Amritpal Singh do not hold any significant position in the day to day life or the running of the democracy. Moreover, a significant minority of 23.4% respondents express the belief that individuals like Amritpal Singh are not important at all in keeping youth engaged in political decision-making and monitoring democracy. This

viewpoint suggests a dismissal of the potential impact of such individuals on political participation and democratic accountability.

Do you think the media sometimes restrains people from doing actual research and creating false narratives as in the case of Amritpal Singh while the media portrayed him as a separatist and terrorist?



Media often engage in selective reporting by choosing which aspects of a story to highlight or omit. This selectivity can be intentional or unintentional and may result in channels refraining and holding the audience back from doing actual research and creating incorrect, untrue narratives. 36.6% of the respondents feel that to some extent the media channels are notorious of doing so. This has resulted in situations where a clear, unbiased picture of circumstances has not been brought the forefront. To complement the results, 34.1% of respondents strongly agree to the notion that media channels or outlets do restrain people from getting an honest picture, as in the case of Amritpal Singh and his arrest.

According to the analysis, we see a result that shows us how media channels build perceptions and narratives especially in context of the coverage of Amritpal Singh and his arrest. The high-profile case was fervently covered in all mainstream media channels where discourse and narratives along with public perception was built and garnered. This was either done by utilizing specific terms, words, metaphors or jargon. The incessant utilization and repetition of certain terms like “Anti-national”, “Separatist”, “Khalistani” culminated in a negative perception of the political figure.

Agenda-setting:

Media does not just report events; it chooses which events to highlight and how prominently to feature them. This power to prioritize news items can sway public attention and dictate the political agenda, subtly guiding the public's focus towards certain issues while neglecting others. In the survey, when asked about whether media sometimes restrains people from doing actual research and creating false narratives as in the case of Amritpal Singh, the respondents unanimously agreed, the media portrayed him as a separatist and terrorist and painted him in a negative light.

Narrative Construction:

The media constructs narratives by weaving facts with particular interpretations. In the case of Amritpal Singh, terms like "separatist" and "threat" are loaded with connotations that frame him in a specific light, influencing public perception to view him through a lens of criminality and danger rather than political activism or dissent.

Impact of Negative Framing:

The negative portrayal of Amritpal Singh can contribute to a polarized public opinion, where the narrative is simplified into a dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them', often overshadowing the complexities of his motivations and the political context. Such framing can diminish public empathy and understanding, reducing the space for nuanced discourse and can create an “enemy image” which leads to perceptions of threat and degradation of security and safety.

Moreover, labeling political figures in such a manner can have serious repercussions on their treatment by both authorities and the public. It can legitimize harsh actions against them under the guise of maintaining public safety and order.



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Media outlets may possess inherent biases or underlying motivations, thereby impacting the dissemination of information to the general public. Such influences may be reflected in the choice of sources, inclusion of expert opinions, editorial stances, and publication of opinion pieces, all of which collectively contribute to shaping societal perceptions.

This research has also brought to light the general attitude of the public towards issues pertaining to political figures who are absconding, or acting like fringe elements in the society. There is a general lack of interest amongst the citizens. They actively choose to not interact with media information, like in this case, information related to individuals like Amritpal Singh. Despite the case being high profile, the respondents believe, political figures like him do not add value to the overall structure of the democracy or in shaping and framing the minds of the youth of this country.

The Function of Media in Public Discourse:

Media narratives are not created in isolation; they engage dynamically with public discourse. By establishing the atmosphere of the discussion, media has the ability to shape not only the subjects of public thought but also the manner in which they are contemplated. Consequently, a reciprocal relationship may form where public discourse and media narratives mutually support one another, potentially solidifying preconceived notions and prejudices. The presence of social media introduces an additional level of intricacy, facilitating the swift dissemination and amplification of narratives, often lacking adequate verification or impartiality. This phenomenon can expedite the propagation of false information and intensify affective reactions.

Broader Societal Implications:

The examination of Amritpal Singh's case serves to highlight a more extensive issue concerning the moral obligations of media within democratic societies. The capacity of the media to mold public opinion necessitates a commensurate degree of responsibility. This situation prompts significant inquiries regarding the function of media in democratic procedures, safeguarding the rights of marginalized groups, and upholding civil liberties amidst potentially prejudiced or manipulative journalism.

Conclusively, the impact of media on public opinion constitutes a pivotal subject of analysis, particularly in a period characterized by widespread media consumption intertwined with everyday existence. Profound comprehension of these mechanisms is imperative for nurturing a more enlightened and fair public dialogue.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the significance and complexity of the role of media in shaping public perception of political issues are paramount, involving a myriad of influences and dynamics. The examination conducted in this study has delved into the ways in which media platforms and channels impact public perception, the utilization of agenda-setting theory to comprehend media influence, the presentation of political narratives by media entities, the implications of biases within media establishments, as well as the effects of tone and language in media reporting. Media outlets assume a critical function in molding public sentiment through the selection of issues to cover, the framing of said issues, and the utilization of tone and language in their coverage. These editorial decisions have the potential to sway which topics garner attention and discourse, how they are construed by the public, and ultimately, the results of political discussions and elections. Nevertheless, challenges arise from biases within media organizations, the propagation of false information, and the polarization of political conversations, all of which undermine the integrity and efficacy of media influence. Despite these obstacles, there exist prospects for enhancing media literacy and critical thinking abilities among the populace, thereby diminishing the impact of media bias and misinformation. Through the promotion of media literacy education, initiatives for fact-checking, and the diversification of media outlets, individuals can develop into more discerning consumers of media content, better prepared to navigate the intricacies of political dialogue. In an ever-evolving media landscape characterized by the proliferation of digital technologies and the democratization of information dissemination, the role of media in shaping public perception of political issues will continue to progress. Hence, it is essential for scholars, policymakers, media practitioners, and citizens alike to uphold a vigilant stance in comprehending and tackling the obstacles and prospects presented by media influence in contemporary society. Only by collectively advocating for transparency, accountability, and critical thinking can we guarantee that the media functions as a positive catalyst for well-informed democratic participation and civil dialogue.



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