
Broadcast Media, Mediated Noise, and Discursive Violence - High Decibel TV Debates and the Interrupted Public Sphere

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Abstract: In exploring the role of mediated noise in socio-political discourse, this paper discusses how noise as an element of the communication model with interruption as its fixed meaning needs reconsideration. Against the backdrop of criticism by the media critics and analysts about high decibel debates in broadcast media, this paper critically analyses the centrality of mediated noise in the political and public discourse in India. Noise, it argues, has emerged as a political device and a discursive weapon employed by the dominant stakeholders, capable of steering discourse and manipulating the public opinion that diverts attention from the pressing issues and emphasizes the political wrangling between the stakeholders while disrupting the discursive process. It underscores how dominant groups produce, manage, and mediate noise as a part of their discursive strategy that simulates constructed sincerity and its unquestionable existence. It is shown that meticulously crafted and stage-managed debate panels in broadcast media are aimed at creating a visual spectacle and are driven by commercial and political interests rather than the concern for informed discourse and debate. Noise, in this sense, is a sound that persuasively refers to its significance, as it creates a realm of discursive ambiguity and undermines a discursive process and its subsequent knowledge. Thus, noise is argued to be a form of discursive violence that manifests in the form of voices that distort the facts, dismiss, or deride a narrative, suppress opposing viewpoints, negate the possibility of discussion, and sabotage opportunities for discourse by creating an atmosphere of fear and violence.

Keywords: Noise, public sphere, Indian media, discursive violence, mediated noise, news debates

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Introduction

One of the most inescapable and prominent features of Indian news channels, in the recent past, has been the rise of high-decibel news debates and discussions. Alongside this, the criticism of mediated noise has also become evident in the reports and commentaries of media critics and analysts (Datar, 2014; Sekhri, 2015; Siddiqui, 2013). So how should communication research make sense of it? In much of the communication studies, noise, and its forms, such as syntactical, cultural, semantic, and psychological, have only received passing attention, where noise has been regarded as a barrier to reception and transmission of communication (McQuail, 2000; O'Sullivan et al., 1994; Rothwell, 2004; Hybels & Weaver, 1986). But does its presence extend beyond its literal meaning and forms—a sound that interrupts and is evident in various forms, ranging from high decibels to phonological and verbal inaccuracies, syntactical errors, and psychological barriers, impeding meaningful conversation and comprehension. Despite the all-pervasive nature of noise, the contemporary communication research has yet to pay attention to noise and its manifestations, its presence in the media, politics, and its socio-political implications. For example, is media discourse noisy, and what are its implications for public opinion and the public sphere? How do political actors use noise to push their agendas? Could noise be used as a political weapon? What happens when a multiplicity of voices emanating simultaneously attempts to contribute or mimics contributing to debates and discussion, impeding meaning and comprehension? Will that be called noise, too? Can noise be a deliberate act of undermining a debate? Can it be used as a political device to reinforce one's position and undermine the other's? These are some of the questions with which this paper aims to grapple, if not answer conclusively.

In the age of 24/7 media, multiplicity of public spheres, and emotionally charged politics and political debates, deliberate use of noise as a political device for manipulating dialogue to strategically undermine and regulate the dialogic and discursive experience is a curious area of academic analysis. Conventional understanding of noise may be one with a fixed meaning and fixed role, a sound that interrupts, but a fresh analytical approach to noise can offer insight into the multiplicity of its meanings and functions that extend far beyond conventional understanding to give insight into noise as a device that is both a structure in itself and part of a larger discursive structure. Noise, this paper argues, is not a sound with its fixed meaning but a sound understood in both multiplicities of its meanings—applications and experience, verbal and non-verbal—which has the power to influence discourse.

Several studies point towards the fact that media no longer portrays real-life events, but events are designed to draw the media's attention or are simply staged for the media (*cf.* Butler, 1997; Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001; Koopmans, 2004, Oliver & Maney, 2000). High octane political discussions, verbal slugfests, and rabble-rousing debates on television with an outpour of emotions, anger, sentiments, and verbal confrontations presented on the camera blur the line between camera covering the debate or debate being staged for the camera, akin to the reality TV shows like Big Brother, which thrive on concealing the difference between fact and fiction. Politics is staged for the television cameras, and assertive, repetitive, aggressive, provocative expressions (Hubbs & Lind, 2013) in TV debates, are employed to make the event appear more legitimate (*cf.* Oliver & Maney 2000). Therefore, is noise merely a device used to grab audience attention? Or is it strategically used to shape the dynamics of the public sphere? In other words, is noise only used for raking in Television Rating Points (TRP), which is discussed in a latter part of this paper, or is it employed for steering political discourse with its implications for the fundamental tenets of democratic discourse, such as participatory dialogue, formulation of public opinion, alternative viewpoints, and freedom of speech and expression?

Defining Noise and the relative literature

While many communication academics would admit to the presence of noise in political and media discourses, given its complexity and relative subjective approaches, it has been barely discussed, if at all, in communication studies. Nevertheless, it has been an area of interest for social sciences scholars in the fields of art, music, politics, psychology, and more recently in anti-terrorism studies (Attali, 1985; Bijsterveld, 2008; Blesser, 2007; Nechvatal, 2011; Weimann & Von Knop, 2008).

In communication studies, noise as an element of the communication model is regarded as a “major barrier to communication” (Lunenborg, 2010, p. 7). Shannon and Weaver, who were primarily concerned with mechanical noise causing distortion on the telephone and of the television signal resulting in poor reception, first introduced this in communication theory in the 1940s. Noise, according to DeVito (1986), is “anything that distorts the message intended by the source, anything that interferes with the receiver’s receiving the message as the source intended the message to be received” (p. 209) and can broadly be identified as physical, psychological, and semantic noise. While in many communication studies, noise has only received passing attention; more detailed investigations into its presence and effects can be found in other areas of studies.

Attali’s (1985) analysis of noise and its relationship to music and politics is a good starting point. Attali, through his description of noise, draws a relationship between music, politics, and economics. He holds that noise is a “weapon” that is channeled through music for the “creation of social control and political integration” (p. 26), while music “... *primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder*” (italics in original, p. 24). Noise, for Attali, is “violence”; as he notes “to make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder” (1985, p. 26). But as a “simulacrum of murder,” does noise have any consequences? If yes, which is more likely? And what are its consequences, and how is it employed and exercised in a given cultural and socio-political setting? Attali draws the relationship between music and noise in arguing that “*music is a channelization of noise,*” and hence of violence; “a simulacrum of the sacrifice” that aids the “creation of social order and political integration” (italics in original, 1985, p. 26). As he notes, “listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political” (1985, p. 6). In this sense, noise can be regarded as an instrument that has political and social significance for the purpose of integration, control, manipulation, and subjugation. To define noise further, Attali (1985) notes:

A noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission. A resonance is a set of simultaneous, pure sounds of determined frequency and differing intensity. Noise, then, does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed: emitter, transmitter, receiver. (p. 27)

This description of noise given by Attali helps to raise questions about what is this “system” in which noise is “inscribed” and how noise operates in it? How does it sustain noise? Who inscribes noise in a system? Can it be a political system with a political inscription of noise? What is its relevance/significance here, and what can it tell us about the socio-political apparatus in which the system exists? While he underscores that noise is a “resonance that interferes with the message,” what remains to be explored are the consequences of that interference, especially if such interference is deliberate with potential for socio-political effects in a society. In the context of this paper, a more precise question could be: Does noise

interfere with the public sphere and functioning of democracy in a society? Attali's (1985) notion of noise as a form of "violence," a "simulacrum of murder," a "weapon" for the "creation of social control and political integration" offers the possibility of assessing its presence and effect on public debate, opinion formulation, public sphere, and its various tenets.

Nechvatal's (2011) discussion on cultural noise is another notable example of noise and its presence in media. In his book entitled *Immersion into Noise*, he explores the idea of "noise in art" by reflecting on "noise's overwhelming sensations and qualities of excess" (p. 19). Drawing a relation between noise and media, Nechvatal (2011, p. 14) notes that noise takes place in a media culture of "massive electronic deluge" formed of "free-floating (ineffable) signifiers." His concern, however, does not remain limited to the presence of noise in media, as, according to him, noise is not solely limited to media space. It is found in different forms and extends to various spaces that often overlap and intersect. He equates *art* with *culture* in arguing that *art of noise* can be referred to as *cultural noise*. The *art of noise*, according to him, can be regarded as a "...realm of antisocial cultural purpose directed toward the revolutionary transformation of an irrational social reality that insists on calling itself rational" (Nechvatal, 2011, p.14).

Through the concept of the *art of noise*, Nechvatal underscores the state of non-communication that manifests itself as a result of high signal-to-noise value—a technical term defined as the ratio of a signal power to the noise power corrupting the signal—resulting in a manifestation of "noncommunicating art of noise." Anti-social interruption, resistance, damage, and frustration as sources of psychic pleasure, according to Nechvatal, are examples of relations between signal-to-noise and art resulting in art noise, an art that "distorts" and "disturbs" crisp signals of cultural communications (Nechvatal, 2011, p. 15). While Nechvatal's primary concern is art, around which he weaves most of his arguments, his thesis on "cultural noise," "noise culture" and "art (culture) of noise" can help with analyzing the state of democratic discourses and the relative presence of noise in it. Protest and dissent, for example, are democratic rights, but when and how can they be classified under the "culture of noise" thesis, and how can one make sense of the presence of noise in protests or protest as noise in discourse, wherein noise is the vehicle for protest, or noise is a key component of protest? In the recent past, the term protest, an important feature of democratic society, has emerged as a political weapon in the Indian public sphere. Several recent examples can be cited to underscore how protests, led by low-cadre party workers (or *karyakartas*) affiliated with various political parties, independent protest organizers, student wings of political parties, special interest groups, and pressure groups, have used noise, if not violence, for intimidation, suppression, and forced retraction of views and opinions, steering the public discourse and channeling the fear into the public sphere (*cf.* Vijapurkar, 2015). In some cases, violent protests are also organized at the behest of political parties. In August 2016, a *Cauvery* river water dispute between Karnataka and Tamilnadu saw violent protests on both sides. The issue that dates back to 1892, since then, has manifested more as a political tussle between the powerful stakeholders while leaving the genuine stakeholders behind. According to Menon (2016):

The fact is that those who engaged in recent violence are not genuine stakeholders but goons let loose by politicians and their fringe organisations. The Centre and states must not let them operate with impunity but put them down with a heavy hand. Simultaneously, they must also evolve mechanisms to involve genuine stakeholders in the process of finding an amicable solution. The people whose interests are most involved are the farmers of Cauvery Basin. They must be educated and encouraged to evolve a formula

for sharing distress in water-deficient years, find a common ground and empathise with each other's problems.

According to a report in *The Times of India* (2016, Sep 19) and several other dailies, a woman later arrested in relation to the protests allegedly torched 42 busses for Rs. 100 (\$1.5 approx.) and a portion of *biryani*. Another report in *Hindustan Times* by Nagaraj (2016), titled "Nagaraj, man behind Cauvery protests in Karnataka, has 'staged' 10,000 protests," gives a peek into the murky world of staged protests. As Nagaraj (2016) notes:

When 67-year-old Vatal Nagaraj takes to the streets, he turns every conceivable item — donkeys, commodes, vegetables, fire lamps, cattle, vehicles, footwear — into political expression...By his own estimate, he plans 200-250 protests every year and has called 2,000 successful state-wide *bandhs*.

Noise is just another ever-present element of these protests to make them more dramatic and camera-friendly for the media, among other things. This highlights other functions of noise too that does not necessarily reinforce its literal meaning of interruption, among other functions, such as intimidation, seeking attention, media worthiness, or suppression or appropriation of meanings and opinions. To underscore the relationship between protests, politics, and the media, Oliver and Maney (2000) use the term "routinization of the protests," which implies that protests are organized by the organizers, keeping the media priorities in view, such as availability of the reporter, dramatics, deadlines, and newsworthiness of the protests (p. 467).

Another text exploring noise in media is Don DeLillo's (1985) *White Noise*. White noise, according to DeLillo, is media noise, the techno-static of a consumer culture that penetrates our homes and our minds (and our serious novels) with ceaseless trinitities of brand-name items ("Dacron, Orion, Lycra Spandex") and fragments of TV and radio talk shows ("I hate my face," a woman said. "This is an ongoing problem with me for years.") (DeLillo, 1985, p. 263). DeLillo's idea of White Noise, according to Eid (2008, p.2), is "a world of spectacles and images, a TV-saturated, information-based world, a world that seems to be controlled by television which is the main source of news, drama, and knowledge about postmodern culture."

Employing DeLillo's description of white noise, it can be argued that primetime news debates on Indian TV amount to hypernoise akin to Baudrillard's (1994) concept of "hyperreality," which underscores postmodern media-saturated society in which simulated reality surpasses the real to appear more real and is yet free from all references to the real. In a similar sense, debates and dialectics with a display and an outpour of emotions akin to reality shows in high decibels, signifying a heightened sense of seriousness, amount to an abyss of hypernoise that annihilates the issue being debated. The state of hypernoise, therefore, is a precise simulation of discourse in high definition, both on and off screen, laden with emotional outpour, passion, drama, and theatrics, almost creating a spectacle that's deeply animated and mimetic, almost a banal display of sincerity that secretively hinders, suppresses, and/or obliterates the discussion while appearing to be contributing to it. As discussed in the ensuing sections of this paper, hypernoise is the micromanaged noise, carefully worked out to legitimize and routinize the simulacrum of noise, whether in TV debates, parliament proceedings, protests, or social media.

For Blesser (2007), noise performs many functions, as he elaborates on the pleasurable and destructive appeals of loud music/sounds. While he primarily focuses on the effects of exposure to loud music on mind and body, he presents some noteworthy observations about the functions of noise while using noise, loud sounds, and loud music

synonymously. Loudness, he notes, is a “space transporter,” as it renders the listeners functionally deaf to the immediate environment by suppressing the internal space of daydreams and overpowering the space of self-generated sounds and pictures” (p 3). Loud sound, Blesser holds, “overpowers the sense and cognitive judgment,” has been a “weapon of torture,” is associated with fear, and is used to “get our attention” (p. 5, 3). He further notes that “religious and political leaders have used loud music to stimulate strong emotions and to suppress rational thinking” (p. 5). Blesser (2007) categorically, using various examples, underscores the ability of noise and loud sounds to distort, disrupt, and destruct much of the environment to which they are exposed.

According to Weimann and Van Knop (2008), for example, noise is “no longer a merely undesirable element” or a “negative” element, as it has been treated traditionally in communication studies. They present a methodical case for noise to be used as a part of the strategic framework for “counter-terror measures,” as they note (2008, p. 891):

When it comes to the terrorist (or any other illegal, harming, and dangerous) communication, one may question the instrumentality of creating noise that may reduce the communicator’s efficiency and success...one can use noises to harm the flow, the decoding, the communicator’s credibility and reputation, the signal’s clarity, the channel’s reach, the receivers’ trust, and so on. Creating and using semantic, psychological, cultural, and physical noises may describe a rich variety of countermeasures and organize them in a strategic framework. Thus, noise could become a key conceptual and theoretical foundation in the strategy of countering terrorism online.

Thus, noise is a strategic tool with various applications and purpose, including distraction, manipulation of message, communication, discourse, and comprehension. Loud debates on TV about a contemporary national issue, for example, may imply that the editorial is extremely serious about the issue; the composition of the debate panel, strategically composed of at least four to 12 politically active members signifying the “representation of common people” that support and oppose the issue, may imply that opinions are sharply divided on the issue and thus the public opinion; loud and angry retorts, recurrent interruptions from the members of the debating panel and the anchor, threats to the panel members of being thrown out of the debate, ad hominem attacks, allegations of being disrespectful to panel members, offensive comments, and derogatory remarks could imply that emotions are running high among the panel members, and thus the public. This, coupled with constant claims (Malhotra, 2016) of being the “most watched” news channel in India, explains how noise is managed and commodified for Television Rating Points (TRPs) and commercial gains. But through this seemingly “serious” and “democratic exercise,” is media informing or representing public opinion? A survey by The Media Studies Group India (MSGI), a media think-tank, found that opinions are “manufactured” rather than informed. The report that examined the media reporting from 1975 to 2011 notes that opinion formulated by media is in “one direction” with “negligible” space for an “alternative view on any issue and policy matter” (Siddiqui, 2013).

Debate panels and Noise

The process of “manufacturing” the opinion, however, is both art and science, if seen through the composition of primetime debate panels—the presumed voice of the people, the “supposed experts” of subjects, the media-appointed representatives of public opinion, and alternative perspectives—crucial elements of democratic exercise and the public sphere. For

the guests on primetime debate panels, television channels rely on in-house or external guest coordinators who “maintain a huge databank of potential guests—each one would have more than 2,000 phone numbers” (Datar, 2014). The guest coordinators are responsible for ensuring the “best” faces—faces that are popular and with which the viewers can identify—are arranged for the panel. This process, however, involves complex backstage work that remains hidden from the audience. According to Sekhri (2015), the guests who are not spokespersons of any political party or group charge “anything from Rs 2,000 (\$31) to Rs 30,000 (\$450) per appearance,” in addition to their professional and personal motivations to appear on these debates. Sekhri notes that, while celebrities/socialites could get up to Rs 20,000 (\$300) per appearance, others, such as “newly-retired men in uniform or security/defense experts, can get up to Rs 30,000 (\$450) for a single appearance.” The debate topics are explained to the guests; their stand on the issue is confirmed before the guest coordinators finalize their names for the panel. However, there are “situations” when panelists agree to “toe a particular line to get on TV” and change their stance when live on camera. As one of the guest coordinators speaking to Sekhri notes; “We have to put together a panel with both sides of an argument or issue. We do our best, but some guests do a 180 degree and change their position when on air. Then we get screwed.”

Sekhri further quotes a guest coordinator, saying that there are some “*besharam*” (shameless) people or “breed of image builders,” such as young politicians, activists, lawyers, or “socialites” who sit outside the TV studios during primetime shows and request the guest coordinator to be invited to the show. The growing demand to be on the debate panels is driven by aspirational desires, coupled with “(s)ocial climbing or political climbing in a world connected by screens rather than personal relations.” While it can be argued that management of debates panels and news agendas are in the media’s commercial interest, the issue, however, is foregrounded in the authentic display of the constructed sincerity and its unquestionable existence.

One report by the Media Studies Group India (MSGI), which argued that public opinion is “manufactured,” conducted a study of 15 TV debates on corruption in defense deals on six mainstream English and Hindi language broadcast channels, including NDTV India, IBN 7, Zee News, NDTV 24X7, CNN-IBN, and Times Now, found that, of the 54 people who participated in studio discussions, five were women and 17 were former defense personnel, of which seven personnel went to 24 programs. A total of 17 representatives of five political parties participated, but Congress and BJP representatives together eclipsed 82% of the representation. Primetime news debates are subject to meticulous micro-management that underscores how noise is stage managed to create a mediated social spectacle.

While this highlights the auditory effects of noise, a quick focus on the emission and channelization of noise can provide further insights into its nature and effects. As James (2014) notes, “noise is *internal* to every signal—the product of production, transmission, broadcast, and reception. Health requires the elimination of noise—or rather, the recycling of noise into signal” (p. 141). The manipulations and alterations of its notes can alter its effects and perhaps can change its purpose altogether. The production and channelization of noise in slogan-raising protests, rabble-rousing debates, interruptive parliamentary proceedings, post-election firework displays to mark the victory, and strength of a political party highlight the auditory value of noise, its strategic conversion from interruption to a signal employed either to disrupt and destruct discursive dynamics or to emphasize or legitimize gratification or grievance. The use of slogans, its articulation (often in the form of rhymes), and its decibel levels, use of microphones, loudspeakers, and drums can influence how a signal is produced and channelized in consolidating a message. A fragment of noise may be interruptive, but “statistically and probabilistically deregulating the ‘conditions’” of dialectics (*music for*

Attali), politics, and economics could result in a “healthy,” resilient body capable of not just weathering, but profiting from noisy interruptions” (Attali, 1985, as cited in James, 2014, p. 142). Thus, hypernoise, as briefly discussed elsewhere in this paper, does not refer to the noise of unbearably high decibels, but rather its micromanagement—strategic implementation that yields in political and commercial advantages for the stakeholders who control it. Noise, thus, is managed and mediated effectively to create a realm of discursive uncertainty with intent to undermine a discursive process and its subsequent knowledge. It is forced into a discursive space to create a “perfect” simulacrum of discourse, laden with possibilities of “informed opinion,” for the purpose of the “collective good.”

Mediated Noise and the public sphere

A healthy public sphere is imperative for a successful democratic process, and politically motivated use of noise can interfere with the formulation of public opinion by crushing participation, negating criticism, and hindering freedom of speech and expression. The public sphere, as explained by Habermas (Habermas et al. 1974), is a “realm of social life,” where public opinion is formed, access is “guaranteed” to all citizens, and media plays a central role in formulating and mobilizing public opinion. Habermas’ idea of public sphere aptly captures its origin and experiences in the West but has been contrasted with that of the non-West, which Freitag (1989 p. 19) calls public arenas, “a world of ritual, theater, and symbol.” Public arena, according to Freitag (1989), is a “universe that sometimes reinforces hierarchy, providing roles for those occupying various positions within society, and at other times expresses conflict among unequals; it may even do both simultaneously” (p. 19). Media is as central to the public arena as it is to the public sphere, and public opinion, as Freitag notes, serves as a “functional similarity” between the two. Fraser (1990), in her criticism of the public sphere, notes that Habermasian’s “ideal” public sphere does not take “power differentials” into consideration but more so in stratified societies, where “...discursive relations among differentially empowered publics are as likely to take the form of contestation as that of deliberation” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). And in case of societies with social inequality, the spaces of deliberative processes “operate to the advantage of dominant groups...” (p. 66) and are “mediated, contained, and presided over by the dominant” (Gournelos, 2010). The Indian public sphere or public arena, “being defined and dominated by majoritarian values and norms” (Ali, 2001, p. 2419), has resulted in marginalization of voices, exclusion of minority groups, and lack of representation of cultural plurality in the media (*cf.* Neyazi, 2014). This, coupled with a narrow range of voices cherry-picked on the prime-time debates with media as a participant rather than a moderator, points towards the problematic nature of media in the public arena, while public opinion becomes a contested territory of the powerful stakeholders. The nature and norms of discursive engagement and public dialectics differ from society to society, and elements such as the use of premeditated language, slogans, degree of discursive aggression, physical scuffle, and noise, *inter alia* can shape the very nature of public discourse and their outcome. If discursive aggression and violence, discussed in the ensuing section, becomes an integral element of TV debates and discussions, then reasonable questions do arise about the role of media in the public arena and opinion formulation.

Noise and discursive violence

Discursive violence, in many studies, has been described as an attempt to sabotage discourse or a discursive practice deemed important for the collective and has been used in reference to hate speech (Leezenberg, 2015), discrimination and licensing of physical violence (Hubbs & Lind, 2013), violation of free speech and victim bashing and blaming (Jiwani, 2009; Schiff, 2015), and right-wing aggression (Sze, 2010). The term has been further defined as “violence constituted by or enacted through discursive behaviors” in the form of “speech acts” (Hubbs & Lind, 2013, p. 157), words and expressions “communicated with the intention of destroying human worth” (Sze, 2010, p. 82) that would “ordinarily constitute social or psychological damage to the targeted person, as well as through speech acts that generate permission for physical damage, including assault and death” (Hubbs & Lind, 2013, p.157).

Free and fair discourse is an essential element of the public sphere; however, political application of noise makes it an element of violence in the public sphere, which, according to Gournelos (2010), is “a shifting terrain of desires, interests, needs, oppression, power, and expression that is *always* and *a priori* in a state of conflict and change” (p. 153). The public sphere, therefore, can be a territory that sustains violence and aggression at the behest of the powerful few.

As an element of discursive violence, noise is employed to “injure or abuse, and the varieties of harms it causes are as multiplicitous as the functions of speech” (Hubbs & Lind, 2013, p.157) and could manifest in the form of voices that distort the facts, are abusive in nature, threaten the stakeholders, dismiss or deride a narrative, suppress opposing viewpoints, negate possibility of discussion, and sabotage opportunities and scope of discourse by creating an atmosphere of fear and violence. Manufacturing of debate panels on news channels in itself is a form of discursive violence against the process of public opinion and the public sphere, as it is a mechanical management of content, ideas, opinions, and conclusion that is manipulative, riddled with biases, and trivializes discourse while simulating honesty, sincerity, and seriousness. Noise as discursive violence is the “verbalized expression of epistemic violence,” as it “...destroys one’s rational argument by “playing with discourse” and by appealing to irrational passion so as to “intimidate and disconcert” (Sze, 2010, p. 83).

Presence of noise in media by default is the presence of noise in the public arena, and the integral relationship between media and its responsibility towards the public sphere makes it a subject of scrutiny. Much concern has been raised by the media and in the media by eminent thinkers and journalists about the diminishing distinction between noise and news, inasmuch as some English language TV channels have rebranded themselves with taglines highlighting the presence of noise in the news. CNN IBN’s tagline, for example, “news over noise” and NDTV’s “you don’t have to shout to be heard” highlight how noise has become the centerpiece of the battle between broadcast media outlets. Such views have been widely echoed in print media. Siddiqui (2013), for example, notes:

Try to recall the last time you saw a debate on a TV news channel that wasn’t shrill or hysterical? Whether it was the military stand-off with China in Laddakh or Sarbjit Singh’s murder in a Pakistani jail or the Italian marines, prime time debates are often rabble-rousing.

Rajdeep Sardesai of CNN IBN News held a similar view in one of his tweets, as he noted, “I guess we are truly in an era where sense must battle sensationalism, news versus noise...” (as cited in Siddiqui, 2013). From much of the media criticism leveled against the noisy rabble-

rousing debates in broadcast media, Times Now has received much attention. Ashraf (2016), for example, in his article titled “Arnab Goswami-style journalism is killing the essence of debates,” slams Arnab Goswami, *The Newshour* anchor on Times Now TV, for “running media trials” and who, according to the article, gives certificates of nationalism and anti-nationalism to those who agree or disagree with him, respectively. A similar article by Daniyal (2016), titled “Arnab Goswami must realise that journalism is about questioning, not blind acceptance,” echoes similar concerns. The article notes:

The rabble-rousing tendencies of Times Now anchor Arnab Goswami have been written about copiously. As is obvious to even casual viewers, Goswami's prime time show often descends to the level of a kangaroo court, as the anchor condemns and harangues his targets in a tone that betrays near-hysteria.

Daniyal (2016), with direct reference to the principle of public sphere, to which media's role is of immense importance, notes that:

This is a sad illustration of the state of the Indian media. Goswami and other sections of the media are giving currency to the notion that opposing the Indian government is immoral. By doing so, they are actually undermining Indian democracy. As the scientist Albert Einstein once noted, ‘Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth’.

Central to this media deficit is the issue of public opinion and freedom of speech and expression. Public opinion seems to be more informed by those who take a jingoistic approach to national issues; the ones arguing against jingoistic and hyper-nationalistic approach are labeled as pseudo-liberals, presstitutes,¹ pseudo-intellectuals, five-star activists, and poseurs. The current public discourse in both mainstream and social media is divided between binaries of nationalism and anti-nationalism. While much criticism can be witnessed among the audience and the media for the Times Now's approach to TV debates, it is also found to be one with the highest Television Rating Points (TRPs) among English language news channels in the successive reports of Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC), India (Bhushan, 2015; Malhotra, 2016).

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of small yet sound literature coupled with media reports, this paper highlights how a narrow view of noise as a mere interruption or a meager element of the communication model can be an idea of the bygone era. Amid the information bombardment that defines much of contemporary life, noise has multiplied in its role and presence.

Noise, as this paper argues, has emerged as a discursive weapon used for the purpose of suppression of views and opinions, intimidation, simulation of seriousness, anger, and of public opinion. It has also identified important ways in which noise has manifested and continues to manifest in the Indian broadcast media, particularly in TV debates, while shaping the discursive process, and that has led to mounting criticism among the media critics. Noise, thus, is communication in itself, which is micro-managed and stage-managed

¹ A pejorative used to refer to journalists who are critical of the state policies. See ‘*Stop calling us Presstitutes: A message to my friends and other Modi supporters*’, Scroll.com, Pandita, R. (Dec 16, 2015) <http://scroll.in/article/774643/stop-calling-us-presstitutes-a-message-to-my-friends-and-other-modi-supporters>

towards political and commercial gains. Therefore, it is not a sound with its fixed meaning but a sound understood in multiplicity of its meanings, applications, and experience —verbal and non-verbal— which has power to influence discourse. From being a mere interruption, noise has emerged as a content of the message in itself, strategically employed for manipulating discursive engagements while evading accountability. Its strategic use by the dominant stakeholders renders it to hypernoise that underscores simulation of discourse in high definition, carefully worked out to legitimize and routinize the simulacrum of noise, whether in TV debates, parliament proceedings, protests, or social media.

Presence of noise in media by default is the presence of noise in the public sphere, and the theatrical debates on TV are rooted in the authentic display of the unquestionable constructed sincerity. The implications of mediated noise on the public sphere are problematic, more so in the stratified societies where the spaces of deliberative processes operate to the advantage of the dominant group, and are mediated, contained, and presided over by the dominant. The mediated noise in the discursive practices that are central to the public sphere and the democratic processes facilitate the rise of discursive violence and marginalization of groups and are shaped to the advantage of the majoritarian values and norms. The rise of right-wing factions, in the backdrop of jingoistic discourses, is less grounded in informed discussions and arguments and more rooted in discursive violence, coercion, and intimidation. Noise, thus, is a device of discursive violence in a public sphere that manifests in the form of voices that distort the facts, are abusive in nature, threaten the stakeholders, dismiss or deride a narrative, suppress opposing viewpoints, negate possibility of discussion, and sabotage opportunities and scope of discourse by creating an atmosphere of fear and violence.

Further discussion on noise can provide a better understanding of how discursive practices in the public realm have been transforming, especially in the Indian subcontinent and its rampant use by political actors and right-wing groups. While this paper is limited in its scope and methodological techniques, it, however, endeavors to fill an evident research gap and set a propaedeutic base for further research in noise studies, especially in mass communications. Also, this paper primarily focuses on English broadcast media and relative commentary by the media critics and has not been able to capture the presence of noise in Hindi and regional broadcast media, where similar trends of employing noise are evidently visible. Using a wide variety of operationalization techniques and alternative sources, further research can assess the presence of noise and its implications for TV news, public opinion, and the public sphere.

While the paper underscores how noise disrupts healthy discursive practices, public opinion, and the public sphere, it does not, by any means, attempt to argue for control and regulation of discourse in the media. Rather, it supports a free market media that engages in self-regulation and evolution that operates without an external control mechanism while keeping the interest of the public sphere and democracy at the heart of discursive practices. A free and fair discourse can only nurture in free market media that operates without the concerns of fear or favor. Nonetheless, it is equally important to mark the emerging trends and turning points in the ever-evolving media sphere.

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