

Strategic Buyouts Support Strategic Communication

On 19 March 2020 at 8 PM Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the country in his typical style and announced a 14-hour self-imposed Janata (People's) Curfew for 22 March 2020. He also asked people to come to their doors and balconies at 5 PM on 22 Mar to clap/beat a drum/blow a conch, to thank the frontline fighters of India's battle against the Corona virus. On 24 Mar 2020 at 8 PM he came on the television again to put 130 crore Indians under a 21-day lockdown. Could the national healthcare and policing system support such a measure, could it be implemented? It did and the Indian Prime Minister proved that strategic messaging is essentially leadership-driven. The message has to be easily comprehended, widely disseminated and address to the target audiences' desires or aspirations. It has to be tailored effectively and communicated seamlessly. A robust delivery mechanism of such messaging is an essential prerequisite to affect the target audience.

Russian-Ukraine war shows that world is in this fast-changing reality, it is tough to communicate effectively, because everyone with a mobile is now a communicator, an influencer or a game-changer. For example, in just the first week of the war, videos on TikTok with the tag #Russia and #Ukraine reached 37.2 billion and 8.5 billion views^[1], respectively. So the governments have to do better than their adversaries and at a faster pace. Interestingly, hardly any media conveys the Russian view point as dynamically as Ukraine's-

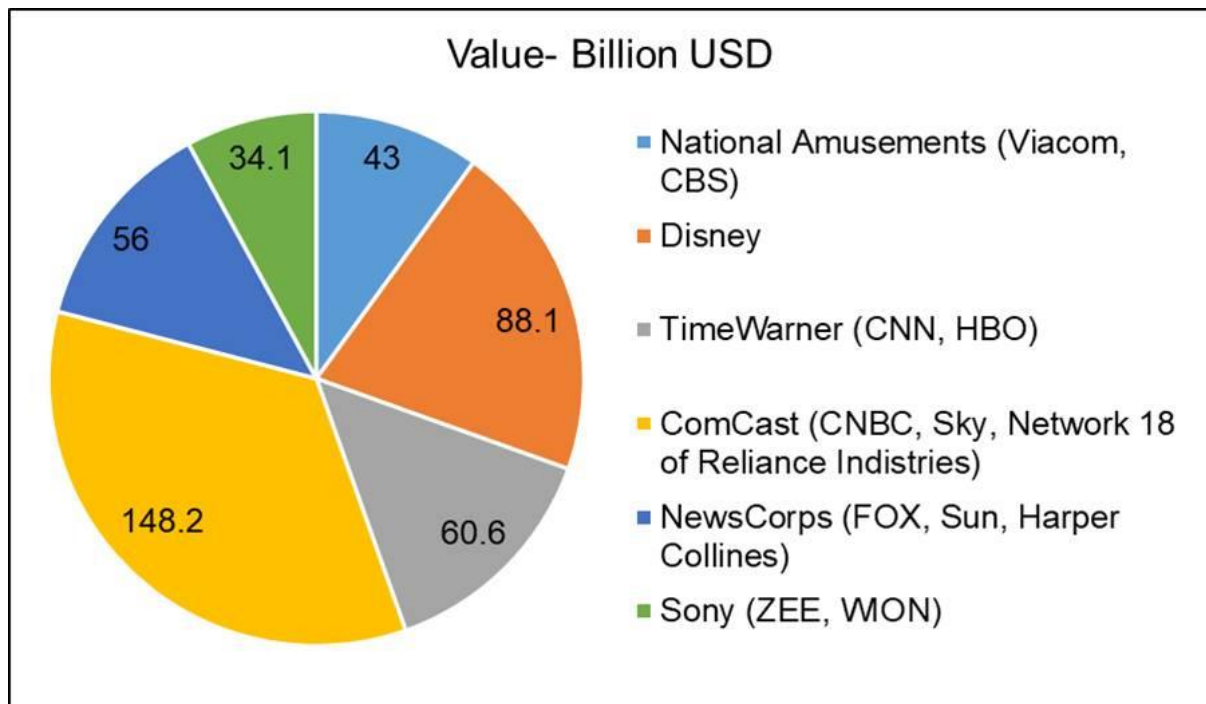
- Vitalyy Kim from Mykolaiv Oblast, Ukraine delivers updates to the people in his trademark calm and humorous style. 'A country with a chicken on its coat of arms will never defeat a country with a fork on its coat of arms.'^[2] – he belittled Russia.
- The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense regularly trolls the Russians, posting memes to reduce stress and keep the Ukrainians motivated.
- Private sector firms like Microsoft responded to Ukrainian messaging and established secure lines of communication to provide real-time cyber threat information and offers technical support.

Strategic Communication Planning considers target audience, context, intended outcomes and appropriate medium as key elements. Of all the elements the medium of transmission is critical to the success of the communication strategy. The choices of media range from intimate, personal contact to impersonal mass emails, conferences and press briefs. The transmitter has to see the world through audiences' eyes, and envision the media which will communicate the messages most appropriately.

The 'How' of the messaging is relevant since the business of news is after all 'a business' and will work for a profit margin – clear and simple. A theorist may argue that conveying both side of the story is a media responsibility and an adage, but the sincerity and depth of the content is clearly never equal. The truth is in the eye of the beholder – believe what you see (or are shown) and hear (or made to hear). There is never an objective reality in the world or the media, but just an interpretation emboldened by our senses, conditioning and belief systems. The media conveys a narration of facts, gives a view and by limiting and controlling these views successfully monopolizes and dominates the minds of the people. The right question here is 'How and Who monopolises media?'

Media Houses

The world's major media is controlled by the 'Big 6'^[3]. The 'media' includes 24-hour news stations, newspapers, publishing houses and internet. This poor medial inclusivity affects the views which are put up for consumers, the pluralism is compromised and highly polarised, as the Big 6 chart below indicates the net worth of the major media houses.



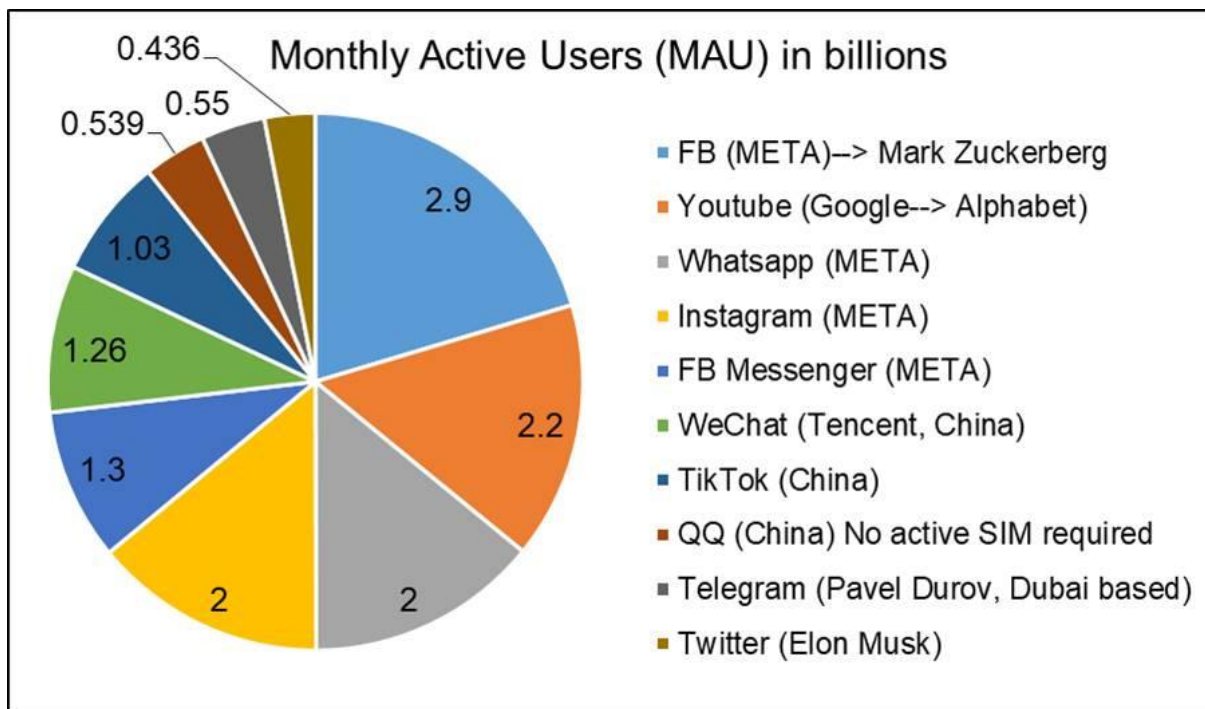
News Channels

New Channels^[4] are unique setups conveying their view points on the various incidents around the world. These news channels collect information, produce the content in a studio and then present it independently or through a broadcast network. Consistent with previous chart, the largest news channels are owned by the Big 6.

- FOX News, New York City (USA)→Final owners NewsCorps
- MSNBC News, NYC (USA)—>Final owners ComCast
- BBC News, London (UK);a public corporation of Department of Digital, Culture, media and Sport , Government of UK.
- SKY News, FTA British Service, owned by FOX News→Final owners ComCast
- CNN News, Atlanta (USA)—>Final owners TimeWarner
- Al Arabiya, Middle East Broadcasting Centre, 60 percent of which is owned by Saudi Government and is based in Dubai
- Al Jazeera, owned by Qatar
- Euro News, France, controlling stock of which is now owned by Portugal based Investment Fund – ALPA

Social Media

Here it becomes very interesting and the media pluralism shrinks further (see following chart[5]). The omnipresence of mobile communication and internet creates a very news hungry segment in the society, who seek and create new bits and pieces fast. The users are hungry for content and thus, the euphoric rise of the social media platforms and microblogging sites. Here the participants are in an informal space, away from scrutiny, they are relaxed and they want to communicate. Drop a line, engage with anyone from all walks of life, and add a video to improve visibility – a modern version of News Channels! These are indeed unrestricted lines of communication.



Anecdotal records show an ambitious, fast-paced and vocal Elon Musk stated on 28 May 2022[6] that his company will not manufacture its electric cars in India unless it is allowed to first sell and service them locally. After all his cars attract a minimum of 60 percent import tax, while high end cars can attract 100 percent. So can his oddities become irksome for Strategic Communication over Twitter?

Why should a nation be weary of media ban? Because it is real

On 2 March 2022, the Council of Europe banned the Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik in Europe. Several American companies banned Russian state media from their internal systems. Apple removed the RT News app from its app store and YouTube blocked it. The Russia's perspective on the Ukraine, or anything else, went blank. Though shutting adversarial state media makes it easier to treat domestic critics, but an embargo on information sources can also create information black holes[7]. This exclusion limits knowledge of holistic (including adversary's) global developments at a crucial time. For Russia it was an Iron Curtain beyond which there was no say, nor justification for its actions.

State sponsored bans are still understandable (driven by geo-economics), probably debated in their legislature and judiciary before evoking. The quick alacrity through which private enterprises and companies rose to ban the state media in their premises makes for a unique case study in recent times. Concurrently, quick release communication and media support by private individuals is also visible like Elon Musk's activation of Starlink (a satellite internet

constellation) to provide high-speed internet in Ukraine and also setup additional network terminals, helping Ukrainians in OSINT and fire support. A media bias will always exist and how to convey friendly narratives, herein lies the need of strategic media buyout.

Way Forward: Content Congruence

A clear and precise messaging is helped by congruence of ideas and narratives. The US government^[8] believes in strategic communication as the ‘synchronization of our words and deeds as well as deliberate efforts to communicate and engage with intended audiences’ – is a whole of government approach with similar narratives. Joseph S. Nye also states that in today’s information age, it is often the stronger story that wins. ‘All in for All’ in the American motto. China also understands this concept, propagating it through the ‘three wars strategy’^[9] – legal, public opinion/media and psychological warfare; projecting the whole of government approach, be it Senkaku or Uighurs.

In case of India the strategic communication has to cater for the provincial needs and the international audience. The coherent governmental policies have to run in synch with regional aspirational politics. Through the surgical strikes, India signalled calibrated and precise operation that was not intended to escalate bilateral tensions. Prompt dissemination of information (much like Israel), demonstrated the whole of government coordination and approach. What is less known is the international empathy which this coordinated strike and information balance created.

The question is also about media driven policies. Instead of trying to assuage outraged national audience the government’s message has to set a stage, formulate content, and modify it credibly as the affect ebbs and flows. Then there is a need for a specialised cadre which works through a coordination centre inputting ideas from the ministries of defence, external affairs, home and most import of all, the information and broadcasting.

Way Forward: Strategic Buyouts

Consider this, since 2009, China spent \$6.6 billion on global media investments. Why? To tell the China story. China Daily (government publication) has paid the Wall Street Journal \$6 million and \$4.6 million to Washington Post to print amiable stories^[10]. China is also in an agreement with ANSA (Italy’s leading news-wire service firm) to run fifty stories on China daily, given by Xinhua (China’s state broadcaster). These are clear examples of pure economic relationship to build a national narrative.

In India, self-reliance campaign is a major clarion and the corporates are poised to deep dive into this opportunity. At this moment there is a major chance to reposition themselves as nation builders too. The major communication giants in the country, Reliance Communication, Bharti Airtel, Vodafone, BSNL and many more have to rise to harness these dynamics and create a ‘non-ban able’ communication media for the country (much like the Chinese model). It is a game of the deep purse after all– and a stout heart.

Should India have a fragile heart? then there is also a ‘borrowing a boat out to sea’^[11]. During December 2019 India hired lobbying firm Cornerstone Government Affairs (for \$40,000 per month)^[12], to represent its interests, when the Democrats criticised the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. Cornerstone is expected to provide ‘strategic counsel, tactical planning and government relations assistance on policy matters before the US Government, the Congress, State governments and academic institutions and think-tanks.’ BRG Group is also

hired to work on the Republican side. These firms and many more hired by 27 other Indian corporates^[13] are expected to manage the 'How' of the strategic communications. The lobbying firms aim to deliver the right message to the right people in timely manner.

The effectiveness of a strategic messaging is highly related to a time and space matrix. This is the time for Indian communicators, planners and practitioners to shed abdication and take responsibility to help the nation grow strong and be heard. A true national strategic communication message will always reflect government policy, an executive message and a societally owned national narrative.

End Notes

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Brig Pawan Bhardwaj, YSM

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