Chapter IV

Emergent Media: Rise of 24x7 News in Assam

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter gives an overview of the evolution of media in Assam in an epistemological manner, but it stops short of elaborating on the present state of affairs. The historical overview helps in understanding the trajectory of growth that media has had in Assam and the region. Various factors such as language, colonial rule, regional forces etc. have been discussed which shaped media all along. The present chapter takes forward the arguments placed in the previous chapter and attempts to analyse the contemporary state of affairs in the state media.

This chapter is based on empirical data collected through observation and interviews conducted with media professionals across the state. As has already been explained in the research design (chapter i) I conducted 15 interviews based on a semi structured guide to interview. As the interviews were long and conducted in a discussion mode there were many questions that were asked impromptu based on answers received. I tried to keep the interviews informal and conducted them not as Q and A sessions but more as discussions, which helped the interviewees to open up to me. The sample size is large enough for the objectives considered and done on a purposive basis. All the persons interviewed are senior professional who have been in the field for a number of years. Their insights were important to conduct the study and have been backed up by field observation of the state of media in Assam. I am interested in the period post- 2004 when the first electronic media channel NE Television made an entry into the market. This was for the first time that a private
satellite television channel was set up in the North East\textsuperscript{27}. Print media which had been the sole source of information till then started facing competition. The idea of the press in Assam now included electronic media as well. It competed for space with the print media as there were no competing television channels. NE TV claimed to cater to the aspirations of the whole region and it took it upon itself to be the voice for their aspirations. The notion of catering to local aspirations has been studied by many scholars. Moy \textit{et al.} (2004) found that readers have a level of trust in the local media and see it as playing a crucial role in democracy. They also found that those who pay attention to local newspapers are more politically involved, and perceive themselves as better informed about local affairs (pg. 541-542), providing some evidence that the local press serves a valuable function in the formation of the public sphere.

The empirical data is presented herewith

\section*{4.2 Growth of Newspapers}

Assam has all along been a print society and the coming of electronic media saw new changes happening on the ground. The already established print sector saw changes in line with the new developments. As is the case with media elsewhere people predicted the doom of print media. But more than the doom what was distinct was a rise in ‘news’ content. Even in case of newspaper there was an increase in the number of dailies.

As Prasanta Rajguru the editor of \textit{Aamar Asom} says “They don’t read, but still papers are coming up. I don’t think people read all of them. Thirty newspapers in a tiny state like Assam is no joke. It’s too much.”

\textsuperscript{27} The eight states situated in the north eastern part of India are referred to as the North East. These states are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland and Sikkim.
Rajguru’s own Assamese daily which is up there among the top selling newspapers in Assam faces stiff competition from the electronic media and other print adversaries. ‘Amar Asom’ in the Indian Readership Survey quarter 1, 2011 retained its 6th spot with an AIR of 1.92 lakh as compared to 2.05 lakh in the previous quarter and 2.44 lakh in IRS Q1 2010. In the context of the national scenario Neyazi (2010: 910) argues, “the resurgence of Hindi newspapers has made it difficult for English-language newspapers to continue their dominance over the social, cultural and political spheres in postcolonial India. It has also resulted in widening the political and cultural space available for the hitherto marginalized groups who could not participate in ‘national’ public sphere because of a certain dominant mode of discourse and the hegemony of the English-speaking ‘national’ elite.” The advent of the electronic media saw dipping sales for sure, but the number of newspapers being published grew astoundingly. So, all the talk about falling sales was actually the division of readership among a larger pool of contenders.

Assam has historically a strong presence in the regional language newspaper sector. Apart from Assamese- Bengali and Hindi newspapers are doing well. By 2013, at least thirty dailies were published from Guwahati alone out of which majority were in the regional language category. In an era where newspapers sales are fast declining Prasanta Rajguru’s disillusionment with the scenario can be well understood in his words “in Assam I don’t see any hopeful situation now. First of all the media houses, their business, their economy is not sustainable. Media as a trade or business is no more sustainable in the state of Assam. That apart the vernacular schools are degenerating, their numbers are coming down, and in even the remote villages you see the English medium schools. I think after 10- 20 years a family which can afford a single newspaper will not go for two newspapers-one English and one vernacular. They will go only for the English. So, the future of vernacular journalism is not at all hopeful.”
Quite on the contrary the Resident Editor of The Telegraph in Guwahati, a Kolkata based publication which has its field office here seems optimistic “you can’t replace newspapers. Newspaper is something you can roll up under your arm and take it to work. Cant do that with television. A newspaper will give you analysis, television cannot do that. You read a newspaper story twice television cannot do that. Television is all about visual, minus the visual there is no news. We will give you news minus the visuals. Obviously newspaper carry a lot of pictures but we don’t carry ten pictures but only one that gives you the big picture and everything else that goes with it. All that television cannot do. In a court story we can give you the quote from a judge. But can you put the microphone to judge’s face?” He seems optimistic not just for the English print media but for print as a whole. And his optimism stems from the historical aspect of Assam’s rich tradition in print. On the ground the optimism doesn’t seem unfounded, Guwahati itself boasts of over thirty daily publications most of them in Assamese and English, Bengali, Hindi and other languages as well. Print seems to be doing well at least in numbers. Jeffrey (2000) has documented the reasons for the growth of Indian-language newspapers, which he attributes to five factors: (a) the rise of capitalism; (b) the communications revolution; (c) the growth of advertising industry; (d) the rise in literacy levels; (e) interest in the political news.

Samudra Gupta Kashyap tends to differ and gives a different perspective to this story of growth “actually there are too many papers for a small state like Assam. Apart from one or two none of them are selling. There is something fishy about it. There are a lot of doubts about these issues, why I think is that one: content is total rubbish except for one or two newspapers. Two: they do not generate content. They mostly depend on what comes by post. People write articles and they don’t have to pay for it, instead I have a doubt that some people are paying to get their article published. So much so that they cannot fill up space, they are using
jokes; they are putting poetry and many other things, even lessons from the class nine or class ten courses to fill up their pages.” Whatever might be his view the matter of the fact is these newspapers are being sold and the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) prove the point year after year. The NRS 2006 reported that in India vernacular dailies have grown from 191 million readers to 203.6 million, while English-language dailies have stagnated at around 21 million. This, is a point in case of where the growth in the print sector is coming from and same is the case with Assam. The growth of the print in Assam coincided with the early days of the electronic media. The imminent threat that loomed large on the print sector made the print industry to pull up its socks and think of ingenious ways to keep hold of its readers.

Formerly editor of Prime News, Manjit Mahanta makes the point “even in newspapers we have seen there is more colour, headlines have become more shorter and catchier, more pictures in each edition, Bollywood photos are more, more lifestyle articles etc.” The local press in Assam underwent a drastic facelift in its printing, design and content too. Colour pages were introduced initially in one or two pages which in case of some newspapers gradually covered all the pages. ‘The Sentinel’ was the first newspaper to introduce the offset press photo typeset, and later others followed. While mentioning the rise of Hindi dailies in the national context Neyazi says “the vernacular modernity produced as a result of rise of the Hindi media is a hybrid form of global and local, foreign and indigenous, elite and vernacular. Such hybridization strategies have enabled the producers of Hindi news media to fight against the dominance of English-language news media by creating a vernacular modernity” (2010: 912). In the case of Assam it was a little different; the competition was not from the English print media but against electronic media post-2004. There was a fight for the local media space which was hitherto the domain of the print industry

28 The Hindi Film industry that is based in Mumbai is popularly termed as Bolywood.
Assam has transportation bottlenecks as one of the main reasons for the media not flourishing in the interior areas. Most of the newspapers are based in Guwahati; the printing, designing is done here and sent to the interiors by road. Even if some of the newspapers were based outside Guwahati like *Dainik Jannabhumi*, they have set up office here to beat the bottlenecks. Pranab Bora opines “Logistics is a huge thing. We print here. Connections here are better. Airport works better. Railways setup is better. A lot of NE students come and study here, a talent pool. Quite a lot of journalism schools are based here… its easier to meet North East CM’s in Delhi than in Guwahati same way it’s easier to get them here than travel to each states. There is Mizoram house, Nagaland house. It is easier to catch them here. But at the end of the day it is the commercial hub of NE. You can start in Silchar like they have started *Jugasankha*, but they have finally come to Guwahati.” For a long time newspapers would reach late to the towns and villages. The farther they were away from Guwahati the late they got their news. “There are many places within Assam who don’t get their newspapers along with their morning cup of tea. The newspapers are transported by road covering a long distance up to 12 to 18 hours before it reaches its destinations, for instance, Silchar one of the major towns of south Assam is about 400 KMs from Guwahati and the road travels through the hills of Meghalaya it takes 12 hours to reach.” (Anbarasan, 2013: 10). That explains the need to open up more offices and localize the production process across the state only to beat the time lack. Most established newspapers today have their printing press in Jorhat or Dibrugarh apart from Guwahati.

These local dynamics which are peculiar to Assam also impacted how the national newspaper came and explored the market, some succeeded and some failed miserably. “When Telegraph came in local

29 *Dainik Jannabhumi*, an Assamese daily was started in Jorhat, and later established its Guwahati edition.
30 District headquarters of Cachar.
31 Bengali news daily published from Silchar, which later opened editions in Guwahati and Dibrugarh.
media made room for Telegraph and now it is doing well. Assam tribune is there. English media today I think is looking at from this perspective. Telegraph is publishing from Guwahati and Jorhat, Times of India from Guwahati, Hindustan Times came and went back. Asian Age came but did not work out.” (Pranab Bora)

Newspapers in Assam have thus remained in the reckoning due to the unexplored local space. Localization in the real sense is only happening now with many of the established names going rural with their reporting and trying to explore the unexplored. Their reach in the interiors give them an upper hand to take on the onslaught of electronic news media. “As the outlook of television is largely national, regional and local spaces have mostly remained unoccupied and are now being appropriated by Indian-language newspapers. However, the fight for regional markets has already begun with the coming of regional satellite channels such as Sahara TV and ETV” (Neyazi, 2010: 918).

### 4.3 Electronic Media in Assam

Satellite television channels made an entry into Assam with NE TV in 2004. A constituent of Positiv Television Private Limited based in Guwahati, it started its operations as a channel for North East India. Taking advantage of being an early starter it catered to different language groups. On a single platform it telecasted news in more than 15 regional languages. Its punch line enumerated its advantage in the market ‘follow the leader’. The initial success of North East Television led to new channels entering the television space of Assam. ‘News Live’ and ‘DY365’ followed in 2008. Paragmoni Aditya, the Political Editor of News Live says “We had earlier Prag channel, local cable television in Guwahati and North East TV. The problem is that we have hundreds of
dialects in NE, some are major languages some are minor dialects. When NE TV started they were focusing on different area specific programmes across NE. So they failed to highlight serious issues as airtime was short for all. Then we (News Live) began in January, 2008 and then onwards, our focus was that our own glory, we have something great here in Assam, great people, great things and then there are bad things like floods. So now for the last 72 hours for e.g. we are running continuous coverage on floods, 40-60 people are continuously working in the remotest parts of Assam.”

What Paragmoni specifically points out is the concentration of later channels on Assam itself. While NE TV tried to do too much in a single channel the later media channels had the advantage of knowing the still unexplored market better. The regional focus shifted to local issues and Assam became the main source of news for the channels. ‘News Live’ started operations in January, 2008 while ‘DY365’ started in October, 2008 two major players in the satellite television space of Assam. They redefined the television market and opened up new avenues of media growth in the region.

Pranjal Phukan, a senior journalist is excited by the changing scene: “The future of electronic media in Assam is very bright. But one thing, there might be more channels, may be frequently they will keep coming, and as we have seen in the national scene if the channels cannot live upto the competition they cannot survive and will finally wind up. Channels which will dedicatedly go about their work will only survive.” He is harping on the core journalistic principles for the success of television channels. Television is often accused of diluting the content for the market. Samudra Gupta Kashyap of the Indian Express highlights this, “they are not trained and not innovative; do not have any research back up. They don’t know what content analysis means and do not have expertise. When they see that these people are talking about a scandal
they search for another scandal. If one (channel) has started an evening song programme the other also starts”. Criticism has been forthcoming from all sections of the journalist community against the television channels. But most of the journalists who make up the staff of these new channels are invariably from the print media. Parag Moni Aditya explains “all the people working in other channels are very good journalists, they have a long career and they have achieved something and they have put their career in line (by joining television). They are full of dedication and they are covering every nook and corner of Assam.”

In its punch line DY365 says Nirbhik Nirapekhyao aru Bisvasta (Fearless, Unbiased, and Trustworthy) three major characteristics of true journalism. It also writes in its homepage “DY 365 wants to be the harbinger of serious entity, wherein the masses and their views are involved, setting a stage for peoples’ forum wherein the news involves the masses and not only the corridors of power.” It distances itself from the corridors of power and promises to be the voice of the people, answering some of the accusations that are leveled against them.

Manjit Mahanta says the influx of television news media will “affect the newspapers. People have taken to watching television in a big way. As an entertaining medium, channels have an advantage. Newspapers play a key role in society but if they too become entertainers they cannot compete.” Its no surprise therefore that most of the criticism that the television media faces comes from the print. The Indian Readership Survey second quarter 2011 survey shows that Asomiya Pratidin, which is the highest-circulated (150000 copies) daily in the entire North East, has lost 2.2 per cent readership.

The second in terms of circulation as well as readership, Asomiya Khabar, too, has lost readership. The other popular language dailies Dainik Janmabhumi, Dainik Agradoot, Amar Asom, Dainik Asom, and
Dainik Janasadharan also recorded loss of a huge number of readerships. The only exception is The Assam Tribune (with nearly 75,000 print-orders every day), which recorded a marginal increase in the number of readers. The Telegraph and The Times of India, too, have lost readership since the early months of 2011. Naturally, people who are not happy with the 24x7 news channels are people from the print media who feel threatened. “The news channels in regional languages may have influenced circulation figure and the readership index of local newspapers in Assam, as everyone prefers channels for prompt and brief news,” said Rupam Barua, a senior journalist and media observer (cited in Thakuria, 2011).

Editors of newspapers don’t seem to agree with this proposition. Dinkar Kumar of Sentinel Hindi opines “it has not made much of a difference to newspapers; if, television channels don’t have quality it does not make much of a difference. What we have seen is that people are not happy or influenced by the few channels which have come up. Television is never clear with stories. If you have to go in detail of any story visual is important but now at the moment television channels are not able to deliver…there has not been much of an influence. There is only one thing. Each one is copying the other. If one starts a music programme in the evening the other also starts, if one comes up with a competition the other starts too, if one shows breaking news the other follows. The viewer is also intelligent they understand copycats, if they don’t like immediately they have the option of changing the channel. In India the time hasn’t come that TV will upstage newspapers.”

But reality is that more television channels are entering the space. In 2010, ‘News Time Assam’ also launched its services as a satellite television channel. It was followed by another 24x7 channel ‘Frontier Television’. Both these channels needed manpower for their operations, and the human resource pool is limited in a state like Assam. Frontier
Television’s website says “Some of the best known career journalists drawn from print and TV set-ups have joined us to ensure that we have the best and most credible team of news-gathering.” It boasts of professionals from the print industry, people with journalistic experience who lend legitimacy to the claim of such channels that they produce content which live up to journalistic ideals. Samudra Gupta Kashyap says “New channels will keep coming up. They will continue to burst on the seam and you will find lot of people disappearing from the scene. And this is because they do not know what they are trying to do. NE TV is shutting down and a new one is coming up, two dailies are also supposed to come up. And there is change of ownership, a television channel has been bought up by the largest circulated daily.” It is no surprise then that print media journalists have been avid watcher of the unfolding electronic media scenario in the state.

The emergence of the satellite television in the state has meant that both the print and television have to rely on the same market pie, advertisement revenue comes from Guwahati and both print and television are situated here. The competition is fierce and palpable. Bashistha Pandey opines “Print media has got its own importance. In electronic media news come with visuals so people are naturally attracted. But the demand of print media is the same as it was before. Print media works as a tangible document. What gets printed is there, you read it today or ten days later, in television you watched it or not, once it is broadcasted it’s gone. Both have different characteristics, the tastes of people are also different. So both the mediums are important in their own right. So, I don’t think that electronic media has posed serious challenges to print. The challenge is that print should publish good news and to give the readers what they want.”

On the other hand Prasanta Rajguru offers a contrary argument “as far as the goals of the newspapers are concerned it has been affected. For
e.g. we are doing stories on river dams, at least 3-4 vernacular dailies in Assam are opposing river dams and the people who are concerned about river dams are living in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji districts. So naturally our expectations are that our growth will be high in those areas. But it is not so, it is because of television. Circulations are not coming down but growth is not as expected.” He almost suggests the adverse effect that electronic media has had on print.

Although newspapers have taken to new style sheet and increasing the quotient of entertainment in their newspapers, it cannot compete with the programming style of television. Argues Pranjal Phukan “in some cases we see glamour quotient is higher in electronic medium than print. Many people want to come on screen for the glamour element. Secondly, in today’s date the popularity of the electronic media has gone up manifolds. Not just popularity but also its influence has increased, the impact that electronic media has with breaking news, in case of print which comes out the next day, the impact even if by little is still less than electronic media.” This dependence on glamour has brought a new genre of journalism in Assam. Some are amused but many senior professionals are not. Manjit Mahanta again says “news media specifically electronic media is largely motivated, biased, mostly out of focus. Newspaper too gives such news and they have limitations, but channels have more limitations. They have to compromise more, their business is larger, lot of money is involved and so called Television Rating Point (TRP) game makes them to show many non-news as news, and real news they ignore. But yes there is space for more people.”

Space for more people is obviously there and more television channels are in the pipeline. Creating new programmes become a challenging task; Samudra Gupta Kashyap asserts the point “what happens for a newspaper is that they have to fill up 12 pages of which they have advertisements, editorials, magazine section, city, region page
etc. They have a system, they have limited space. For television they have to be 24x7, round the clock. Where would they generate the content, how would they generate the content. For one they have never done a market survey before they launched a channel.” A close observation of the two leading electronic media channels shows that most of the content generated is a copycat of the other. And most of the time these programmes are slotted at the same hour. So, if one has a talk show called ‘Mat-Bhinnamat’ the other comes up with ‘Prekhyapot’, Talk Time is met with ‘Prasongokrome’, Reality show ‘Bihu Rani’ has ‘Bihu Kunwari’ to contend with, ‘DY Medley’ has a counterpart in ‘Jhankar’, ‘Raijor Kathgora’ is met with ‘Ji Kom Socha Kom’. The schedule of programming hints that in a bid to outdo each other they end up being imitators of others. Original programming is at a premium.

Pratap Bordoloi himself the editor of News Time Assam and a senior journalist with over three decades of experience says “If we think of a healthy society electronic media hasn’t been able to contribute. If today you ask the young generation they will say we find more information on the Internet. This generation likes to do further analysis and research on issues. Even the media today collects little local information but all other information is collected from the Internet.” He is critical of the superficiality of the medium that is television.

This makes it easier to criticize the electronic media as Dinkar Kumar points “they (electronic media) are not only immature but also don’t understand what to show and what not to. They think there is a lot of money and lot of influence can be earned by opening television channels. But they have not been able to achieve what they wanted. If you have a powerful tool and you don’t know how to use it then you are bound to misuse it.” He is severe on the lack of research and objectivity that these new channels display. But inspite of all such criticism Manjit Mahanta says “it (satellite channels) will affect the newspapers. People have taken
to watching television in a big way. As an entertaining medium channels have an advantage. Newspapers play a key role in society but if they become entertainers they can’t compete. If ‘The Assam Tribune’ today opens a channel they cannot give entertainment, but that is the quality or characteristics of channels. India Today is a serious magazine but Aaj Tak, the channel of the same group is an entertaining channel.”

There is a lack of focus among the channels about their target group. DY365 in its manifesto says “NORTH EAST, an integral part of India, with its charm and diversity, is a heaven in terms of its culture, natural beauty, resources and its unique individuality. Guwahati, the gateway to Seven Sisters, acts as the threshold to North East… The vision is to show the world the real picture of the region.” And so it started in 2008 with transmission in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and English in consonance with its said mission. But in 2013 it abruptly stopped transmission in English, Hindi and Bengali and only stuck to Assamese. The model served up by NE TV of catering to the whole region was not working for other channels. Too many languages and too many focuses were diluting the content. News Time Assam which came only in 2010 had the advantage of being a late entrant; from the beginning it has been making its programmes only in Assamese, a sign of the change in focus. News Live had other ideas and it started two more channels which catered only entertainment fare in Assamese. They understood the market better than the other players. Paragmoni Aditya says “we (News Live) have come in and established the market. We have 3 channels Rang, Ramdhenu and Newslive and if you see the viewership we cover 70% of the viewers, which means we get 70% of revenue, so, the others divide the rest 30% in such a scenario it is difficult to survive.

It is clear that although the first satellite television channel came in 2004, it is only in the last couple of years that the market is taking shape. New players have started to consolidate and now know better what the
people want. The print sector is also getting used to the new order, facing challenges not only in news content and sales but also attrition of senior employees to the electronic media.

4.4 Press and Dirty Money

The capital required to run a media organization is huge, and profits even harder to come by. It takes years of operation to break even and earn profits. Then what explains the boom seen in the recent years in the media sector. Where does this capital come from? And are there such profits that it can have space for more players in the market. Writing in ‘The Hindu’, Sevanti Ninan opines “Regional media is increasingly a colourful mosaic in terms of who owns it or runs it, be it TV or newspapers, or periodicals. And a State which runs the gamut of possibilities is Assam. Congressmen, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) sympathisers, former militants, former bureaucrats and police officers, litterateurs and novelists: the State’s proprietors and editors are drawn from all these categories” (2009). She echoes the ownership pattern of the state media aptly. It is only two publication houses Assam Tribune group and Dainik Janmabhumi that are involved only in the media sector. Assam Tribune has completed 75 years of its existence and is still going strong. Paragmoni Aditya says “it (newspapers) was started as a mission by groups such as Dainik Janmabhumi and Assam Tribune, it started as a mission but activism is still there, and I believe are well qualified and fit for other jobs as well. But yes sometimes some people have some intentions; the people who have the cash pool may have (questionable) intentions.” But media in Assam today is no longer a mission, only a business opportunity.
Samudra Gupta Kashyap says as a point in fact “It is all dirty money in circulation. It is also influencing the content that’s what I believe. Otherwise why would a channel, a particular channel they have a weekly one hour personality based interview programme one to one. On a channel I found one whole hour repeated twice in the next seven days till the next episode comes, was the interview of a former MLA of a constituency. He was not an important political leader, an independent MLA elected for two terms, a former half educated former ULFA cadre. So this man also appears for one full hour and the anchor asks him all kinds of question under the sun, and this man also tries to answer, and it is glorification of this man. What other interest would it serve apart from personal gain to interview such a person for a show? There must be some exchange of money. People are not waiting to listen to that man’s one hour interview.”

When the regional media space in India suddenly witnessed a dramatic boom, it was the Telegu news channels which led the way, by investing heavily in media organizations, technology and manpower. “The dramatic expansion of Telegu news media channels over the past ten years is fuelled in large part by the availability of large amounts of ‘speculative capital’ within underground, ‘grey’ or otherwise illicit economies, coupled with the growing numbers of a ‘lumpen political class’ that sees in the establishment of a news channel a pathway to social and political legitimization and influence (Shaw, 2009). NE TV which started its transmission on March 16, 2004, was thought of as a game changer. But by 2008 things started to sour between the two co-owners, and allegations started to be heard about financial irregularities. The channel had to finally close down for a year before it could start production again in a new avatar with six channels viz. Focus News, Focus Haryana, Focus Bangla, Focus Odisha, Focus NE, and Focus Hi Fi. It rebranded itself and opened channels in Odisha and Haryana. The company is now under the scanner of Company Law Board for taking
loans from the scam tainted Saradha Group and also an alleged firm involved in the coal scam of the country called Jindal Realities owned by former Congress parliamentarian Naveen Jindal.

Dinkar Kumar “As you see market can only grow. Newspaper is like market today, it’s no longer a mission; almost like the opening of shopping malls. Now people have money and even politicians are investing. Earlier it was not so, it is happening elsewhere and here too. Everybody has a newspaper and thinks that it will come to serve different purposes. The main factor of opening newspapers is the influence. How much of help it comes to is a different issue. But some surely open for influence, and some use it as a mask for different business interest. If you look closely there are a handful of groups that only have interest in the media sector like Assam Tribune group, Sentinel group, these are real newspapers as they don’t have other interests. Others have different business interests and the newspaper acts as a mouthpiece or a mask.”

In 2011, Seven Sisters Post, a new daily was launched from Guwahati with much fanfare. It claimed to be the only regional newspaper catering to the aspirations of the people of the North east. What was a promising start soon ended in catastrophe for the employees. The daily was owned by the Saradha Group of West Bengal, which invested a lot of money into the North East. Salaries, for a change was good for journalists, many journalists from the region who were working in the national scene returned back. Subir Bhowmik, eminent journalist and formerly of the BBC, joined it as the editor. But catastrophe struck soon, after few months news started coming about the financial irregularities of the group and started to show on the functioning of the newspaper. Ultimately, the newspaper was shut down leaving scores of journalist’s jobless overnight. What was worse was that they were not paid salary for the past few months. ‘Sakalbela’ a sister publication of Seven Sisters Post which had its head office in Kolkata also shut their shop as a result. The Saradha
group was involved in one of the largest financial chit fund scam to hit the eastern region of the country. ‘Prime News’ another satellite television channel was launched by a chit fund group ‘Jeevan Surakhya’. After it got engulfed in financial problems, the group sold the channel to a real estate company Brahmaputra Infrastructure private limited owned by Suresh Prithani in 2012. And after a few months of functioning it stopped broadcasting from October 1, 2013, leaving around 170 employees, journalists and technicians jobless overnight.

Dinkar Kumar says “it is disappointing. The real problems of the people are not discussed. All unnecessary things are discussed more. Because, all people with money have opened channels and newspaper and they only think about their own interests.” Most proprietors in Assam are people who have not come to the media sector for the sake of journalism. Its businessman and contractors who invested heavily in a sector that was unexplored. The Pratidin Group which runs the highest selling Assamese daily ‘Asomiya Pratidin’, the weekly Sadin and the women’s magazine Nandini and also recently took over News Time Assam another satellite news channel beaming from Assam is one such example owned by the contractor Jayanta Baruah. Partha Pratim Baruah writes in The Times of Assam web portal “the current scenario being exhibited in Assamese newspapers is just an example of how treacherous and characterless our state of the media is.”

News Time Assam which was started in 2010 also faced a precarious situation financially. Started by the Rose Valley group of Kolkata under the company Brand Value Communication, News Time Assam was unable to garner profits. The company’s financials were precarious and was on the verge of closing down when the Pratidin Group bought it for an undisclosed sum and started operating it from March 1, 2013. Incidentally Rose Valley group was also a chit fund company dabbling in the real estate sector all over the Northeast. Manjit Mahanta puts the point
across when he says “in the electronic media, I have a doubt whether there is a owner who loves basic journalism, but these are the kind of owners who are the majority in electronic media.”

4.5 Influence of Politicians

Politicians find media organizations as a means for furthering their political ambition. This is a trend not only peculiar to Assam but also other major states of the country. “For instance, political parties own the majority of news channels broadcasting in the four primary southern Indian languages of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, which constitute over a third (approximately 36 percent) of the total number of television channels that have been officially registered in the country between 2000 and June 2010 (Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2010). Politicians have indeed invested money in the media sector in Assam. It is a State with a lot of political activity and a fair amount of commercial media, despite a low level of business activity (Ninan, 2009).

Himanta Biswa Sarma, presently a minister in the state government has stake in Pride East Entertainment Private Limited which owns News Live, Rang and Ramdhenu, three prominent satellite channels. Matang Singh, a former Congress parliamentarian owns Positiv Television Private Limited, which has six channels Focus News, Focus Haryana, Focus Bangla, Focus Odisha, Focus NE, and Focus Hi Fi. Anjan Dutta, a former minister of the Congress runs Ajir Dainik Batori, and Bijoy Krishna Nath, a former member of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) owns the largest circulated Bengali daily Dainik Jugasankha and the English daily Eastern Chronicle. Prasanta Rajguru puts this trend into perspective “post 2000 scenario media had a mushroom growth in Assam. One after another
television channels were coming up, even newspapers. So, now the politicians don’t bother what newspaper write because they themselves are media managers. Newslive, *Dainik Janasadharan, Dainik Batori* are owned by politicians. They hardly bother. They have got the pulse of the media because in the WTO regime they have seen that media governance is done by corporate. So, real governance is done by corporates. So the politicians, who became instrumental to the corporates, form a party.”

Pranjal Phukan says “it is an unholy tradition. Whenever a politician opens a channel or a newspaper he or she will give politics the prime importance, if they don’t give its good, but at some point or the other this influence will come. For the media this is really an extremely sad situation.” The link between politicians and corporate world has always been strong. One cannot survive without the blessing of the other and is intrinsic to the understanding of media today. The particular patchwork trajectory of Indian media reform has yielded a minimally regulated investment terrain with spaces and opportunities for differently located social subjects to realize a variety of aspirations, ranging from profit-seeking on the part of established capitalist enterprises to ‘power-seeking’ or attempts by various actors to garner and consolidate political, social-cultural and economic influence (Roy, 2011: 766).

“They have every say, all the say is from the proprietor only. In Assam the role of the editor is diminishing day by day and the show is run by the proprietor. And this trend is seen in international as well in national media.” This statement from Manjit Mahanta clarifies who really runs the show. Journalists are becoming tools in the hands of their proprietors. Prasanta Rajguru says “first of all maybe it is sustainable for time being. But if it is related to the person’s political career, its growth is related. Once the political career comes down automatically the channel comes down.” He further adds “during Assam agitation particularly media had played a big role. It was practically a media managed agitation. It was
made by media, aided by media, handled by media everything was done
by media. So people who had money thought it is the only way to get
extra constitutional power in order to command the conscience of the
agitated people in the morning. This is the only way. And some of them
were very successful.” He offers a historic argument to the rise of political
class proprietors in Assamese media. The Assam agitation indeed was the
biggest political activism that the print media in Assam performed.
Approaching the relationship between media and democracy from the
perspective of substantive democracy, whereby the democratic political
project of democracy is about enabling common or popular access to
power – what the political theorist Sheldon Wolin calls maximizing
common ‘experience with’ power (1989: 153) – the overall aim is to
investigate how the growth of television news media has affected the
distribution of social, economic, and political power, and the possibility of
its redistribution, in India.

Many scholars view the rise of Hindi newspapers as part of the rise of
communal and identity politics in India and hence doubt its role as a
vehicle of democratization (Hasan, 1998; Rajagopal, 2001). In 1980’s
Assam had a strong press and editors were supposed to be the torch
bearers of change. Radhika Mohan Bhagwati the editor of Dainik Asom
says “we are the gatekeepers. I know my duties. But if today Assamese
press would have played a proper role, Assam’s foreigner movement
would not have been derailed. I was also part of that group of editors. I
lost my conscience and became a part of the agitation, part of the
movement. I became biased. Again I feel if Assamese journalism would
have played a proper role ethnic divisions could have been avoided. Our
hatred and our superiority complex came in our thoughts.”
4.6 Some Issues in Ethics

Ethics is one issue which is always shoved under the carpet. Media has always faced flak for not adhering to ethical journalistic norms when it comes to reporting. The issue of ethics cannot be seen in isolation, the previous two points of political influence and role of money are intertwined with it. With a deluge of newspapers and electronic media, Assam suddenly needed a huge number of journalists and professionals. Most of the journalists who joined were not trained people. Pay was less, and except the Assam Tribune group none other implemented the wage board salaries. So, for young journalists who joined, the job was a way to get a secure job. Journalism in itself was not the end; there was hardly any security in the job. Arijit Aditya notes “there are a lot of accusations on the ground. Some reporters enter as Jugasankha reporters after some days you see them getting government jobs. For e.g. in Hailakandi district what I have seen is that most of the newspaper reporters are government servants.” As a matter of fact the stringers who report from the interiors and small town are more often than not school teachers, for whom reporting is just and added incentive to get closer to the administration and the local politicians.

In fact many politicians are known to patronize local stringers and reporters for their political gain. Samudra Gupta Kashyap narrates an experience “and local politicians are known to do two things buy them on an installment basis that’s what I found. Some give the local reporters 500 rupees a month, not all newspapers but some newspapers. One MLA told me I give them 500 rupees a month. Two fellows I give 500 rupees a week, this was in Nagaon district. They write good things about me and they do not write bad things. So that is the situation here. And I know of a
local reporter who was posted in Haflong\textsuperscript{32} he was with a print media and a new television channel requested him to do their coverage also, so he became both their reporters. So he got a small handy camera and sent his news initially by courier and subsequently by internet. After 4 or 6 months of sending news no salary was coming so he called up the editor to ask for the salary, the editor told him you are in a place like Haflong, floating in money, rather you should be giving us the money.” The further you go from Guwahati the murkier the nexus gets. Examples such as these might not be the norm but they are obvious hints to the underbelly of journalistic practices in the interiors. Most often these reporters who are not on the payroll of the media organizations but are paid per article basis, double up as reporters for more than one organization, and even print and the electronic media simultaneously.

In the national scene ‘scholars expressed concern over the rise of Hindi newspapers, which became synonymous with ‘Hindu’ newspapers, indicating the orientation of Hindi newspapers in support of the cause of Hindu chauvinist forces (Neyazi, 2010: 914). In case of Assam, Ajit Bhuyan, the editor of a daily was jailed under the National Security Act, and has been charged with burning the national flag. He and the paper’s chief editor, Haider Hussain, have in the past been nominated by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to a roundtable to negotiate with the Government of India. Infact, there are a lot of editors and journalists who still sympathize with the banned outfit and pick up cudgels on its behalf.

“One localization has also resulted in a trivialization of news that emerged with a simultaneous empowerment of local citizens who cannot be reached by English-language newspapers” (Neyazi, 2010: 921). One of the biggest casualties in the television media is sensationalism of news. Media editors have played the role of moral police more often than not.

\textsuperscript{32} Haflong is the district headquarters of Dima Hasao, an autonomous region for the tribals, with its own elected council which has powers to frame rule for its people. There are nine such scheduled autonomous councils in Assam.
This was highlighted by what is now called as G.S. road\textsuperscript{33} incident. A young girl on the night of July 9, 2012 was thrashed by a mob because she was out drinking in a pub. The girl was dragged by the mob onto the street and thrashed and sexually assaulted. All this while television crew from News Live which had arrived on the scene rolled camera and telecasted the whole incident without ever trying to intervene or help the girl. The telecast of the visuals caused huge uproar in the state, Atanu Bhuyan, the editor had to resign taking moral responsibility. But moral policing has not stopped and is a favourite past time of the electronic media here. Paragmoni Aditya of News Live tries to justify the moral policing “sometimes we have shown young girls in illicit relationship or sexual relationship where people have caught them red handed. Sometimes we show visuals of such cases, some people say this is entertaining or cheap thing. But yes, if today a girl enters somewhere with her boyfriend and does something wrong, next day some other girl after watching my bulletin will think ten times. Yes it looks bad but there are some good implications.”

As Elmer Davis (1954) pointed out “the good newspaper, the good news broadcaster must walk a tightrope between two great gulfs- on one side the false objectivity that takes everything at face value and lets the public be imposed on by the charlatan with the most brazen front; on the other, the ‘interpretive’ reporting which fails to draw the line between objective and subjective, between a reasonably well-established fact and what the reporter or editor wishes were the fact. To say that is easy; to do it is hard.” The perils of the onslaught of media are sensed in Radhika Mohan Bhagwati’s words “there is ill competition between the electronic and print media. One is making news the other is breaking news. By breaking news they are changing the total condition of the media. Wherever the camera goes it becomes news. It encroaches upon people’s

\textsuperscript{33} A popular street in Guwahati known for its malls and pubs, frequented by tourists and locals alike.
privacy and their rights also. The electronic media has a larger space as wherever it goes it becomes news. Print has to compete with this space. So many electronic channels have come what change has it brought. The competition among them is not healthy. There should actually be competition on the quality of the media but this is unholy competition. The competition is to get the market share. This market oriented stance has spoilt the tradition of media in Assam.” This poses a serious question about the media and journalism ethics, and the issue of globalizing consumerism, as the drive for aggressive expansion is essentially driven by the fact that newspapers have to create audiences whom they can sell to advertisers at a time when television is rapidly taking advertising revenue away from the newspapers. (Neyazi, 2010: 916)

Radhika Mohan Bhagwati offers a way out and suggests measures for the media to adhere “there should be some self regulation. Self regulation doesn’t mean that somebody will impose a code of conduct. That code of conduct should come up from us. If we do not ourselves discover a code of conduct then somebody must step in and impose on us.”

### 4.7 Localization of Content

Localization of the press has gone hand in hand with the notion of giving power to the people. Emancipation of the masses was seen as an idealistic goal of local media. Democracy has taken the help of media to make its presence felt. Assam is one of the most underdeveloped regions in a developing nation like India. The boom in the media sector naturally heightened people’s expectation from it. As with the case of the national media the process of localization started by Hindi newspapers involved decentralizing production, distribution and consumption. It was made possible because of the arrival of the new technology and the information
and communication revolution in the mid-1980s (Neyazi, 2010: 917). So much so that the localization of the press was said to be responsible for the popularity of Hindi newspapers. Ninan (2007) highlights the rise of Hindi newspapers through the process of localization.

Stuck with Guwahati for a long time, the Assamese dailies failed to find audience in the remote parts of the state what Anbarasan (2013) terms as the ‘delayed news syndrome.’ Newspapers would reach some parts only in the evening and by then the news would be stale. For e.g. a newspaper to reach Lakhimpur or Silchar in Barak Valley it had to cover a distance of 400 kilometres by road before it could reach the readers. In 1997 the daily *Aamar Asom* published from Guwahati by G.L. Publication realizing this communication gap set up their first office outside Guwahati in Jorhat. It could easily cater well to the whole of upper Assam in the morning itself. *Asomiya Pratidin* the largest circulated daily soon followed and opened its offices in Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur, and later at Bongaigaon. Other dailies realizing the time advantage soon started following suit and imitated the localization policy adopted by the *Aamar Asom* and *Asomiya Pratidin*. *Jugasankha*, the premiere Bengali daily also opened a Guwahati office to tap the Brahmaputra valley market.

Pranab Bora shares the optimism “I would like to see telegraph having more editions. Sentinel has a Jorhat and Dibrugarh edition. Eastern chronicle now has valley edition. The rate of literacy in this region is very high. Given that scenario more the merrier…I think it’s a good thing if you have more newspapers you have more opinion. And it is better to make opinion known on a newspaper than to pick up a gun…if you have a Golaghat newspaper they will cover Golaghat like nobody’s business in every way possible.” The optimism was largely attributed to the consolidation of the print dailies in early part of the decade of 2000’s. It

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34 A district on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra bordering Arunachal Pradesh.
was a boom time for the newspapers, they were doing well and most of them could afford to open new editions. It was a consolidation phase before the coming of the electronic media. The hope for localization of content grew. With new editions the dailies looked for new stories and separate pages for each edition. Jeffrey (2000: 51–74) has illustrated Eenadu’s contribution in localizing the newspaper, and creating a new base for local advertising from retailers, small business and sometimes from unexpected sources, such as mourning the death of prized pets and working farm animals.

“By encroaching upon the domain of English-language newspapers as the exclusive conduit of modernity, the Hindi newspaper created a vernacular modernity which contributed to initiating a paradigmatic change that also opened up the space for the marginalized classes to participate in the global circulation of modernity” (Neyazi, 2010: 915). The local dailies in Assam also became a conduit for this form of modernity, by constantly trying to penetrate the local space, reach the interior villages and do the communication job. Prasanta Rajguru justifies “but in vernacular dailies one thing what we are doing is that we are focusing on rural developmental activities, whatever developmental activities are there in the block level or grassroot level. We cannot afford any big thinking.”

Dinkar Kumar elaborates on The Sentinel’s edition “we have only two editions, Guwahati and Dibrugarh. The only difference in the two editions is that Dibrugarh gets the newspaper early morning. All the pages are done here and sent, and the printing is done there. Earlier we had to transport which took time. Also Dibrugarh news is added but basically there is not much difference between the two editions. Getting the newspaper early morning is a big achievement. Earlier it would be only in the afternoons that it would reach.” He specifically discounts the theory of
having local content. For them it’s only a concept of making the newspaper available early in the morning.

Bashishtha Pandey says about *Purvanchal Prahari*, “there are four editions published today they are Guwahati, Jorhat, Tinsukia and Lakhimpur. Each of these editions has two separate pages on the specific area. All the pages are made here and decisions taken at Guwahati. And they are only printed at those places.” So, decisions are centralized, it’s only the mechanical processes that have in reality been placed at different locations. The concept of local editions in the case of Assam is a mechanical one and there was no interest in exploring the news of these areas. Arijit Aditya of *Dainik Jugasankha* explains “earlier when we had 12 page publications, we dedicated two pages for local news. One page was for Cachar and Dima Hasao districts and another for Karimganj and Hailakandi. But what happened was there was not enough news being generated to fill the two pages. Sometimes news which was not worthy to be published had to be done. Finally we mixed both the pages. We broke the titles of the page to only Barak Valley news, no longer separate district pages.” There were such experiments to include supplementary pages for local news for separate editions, but most of them have been a failure. These efforts more often than not have limited themselves to a single page supplement. Where all editorial decisions are taken at a single location the importance of local news gets diluted.

The arrival of the satellite channels has opened up the local space in an unprecedented manner. Santanu Bhuyan says “What happens is that most of the stringers are teachers who report apart from their school duties. Now there are dedicated reporters in every village or every 10 kms.” The pressure to generate content has seen news media going to every nook and corner of the state. But there is also criticism of the electronic media as having a deliberate Guwahati bias in its reporting. Guwahati being the commercial hub of the region sees a lot of activity
political as well as economic. It is convenient for these channels to concentrate their resources on Guwahati only. When fledgling channels such as Prime News and News Time started operations, due to their limited resources focused only on Guwahati.

Manjit Mahanta furthers the criticism “in television there is not much of local content. They package every news from international to national to local in a single news bulletin. Newspapers that way carry local news more. Local news that way in channels is ignored. For e.g. agriculture is important for a state like Assam. But we know what the minister says or any organization if they have a protest rally is news but grass root agriculture news is not done, same with other such community based reporting at the local level. We are incident based, press release based or any function related reporting. An editor sitting in Guwahati many of them won’t even know where is Mancachar, or where is Namphake or a town near Hailakandi. Some of them don’t think Barak valley to be part of Assam, so there are limitations to their understanding which are reflected in their news selection.”

“Localization has definitely helped hitherto marginalized groups to participate in the public sphere. At the same time, it has also resulted in the commodification of news as, on many occasions, media producers publish trivial news with dramatized content” (Neyazi, 2010: 920). Samudra Gupta Kashyap argues that news has always been “Guwahati centric. Every channel from 6 pm broadcasts programmes like Guwahati Live, Guwahati Guwahati, Guwahati Metro etc. But there is need for that as Guwahati is an important centre in terms of everything. Guwahati is a big news maker; any foreigner who comes to North east comes to Guwahati first.” Pranjal Phukan adds “yes, today none of the channels in Assam can claim that they have been able to highlight the problems of the

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35 Mancachar, Namphake and Hailakandi are three extreme points of Assam, and the interviewee meant interiors of the state by the analogy.
people of the nook and corner of the state. But yes they have been trying.” Such is the fear of going down the untrodden path that media in Assam have not been able to decentralize its content. Some blame it on the ignorance of the people; others say the level of illiteracy is too high.

Samudra Gupta Kashyap agrees “no that (localization) didn’t happen. That is why so many papers. The period when literacy had grown and people had become more aware and hungry for information, that was the time when the three original newspapers were not reaching the districts and the communities to reflect everybody’s view point or everybody’s issues or concerns. That gap was sought to be filled up by other people but they didn’t put an effort to fill up those gaps.” The gaps could not be filled even by the electronic media. The 24x7 channels had their own agenda to pursue. The editors could not see beyond the Guwahati. The development function of the media remains only an idealistic vision.

4.8 Journalism as Profession

On October 4, 2013, the employees of the Prime Channel, a 24x7 news channel of Assam staged a protest with black cloth on their mouths against the sudden closure of the channel. The closure is not the first such case in the history of media in Assam. 2013 also saw the closure of ‘Sakalbela’, a Bengali daily published from Guwahati, Seven Sisters Post belonging to the same corporate house and ‘Dainik Pratibimba’, an assamese daily published from Guwahati. In all the cases the closure was sudden and left scores of employees with a bleak future. Around 170 employees lost jobs in Prime News channel, and around 200 employees of the Saradha group working for Seven Sisters Post and Sakalbela were left jobless. 2014 has already seen the closing down of a Bengali daily Sangbad Lahiri from April 1, run by the Shillong Times group of
Meghalaya. This sort of situation does not give confidence to budding journalists. Even if they are considered rare incidents, still for journalists the scenario does not look bright.

News Time Assam has already changed hands from Rose Valley group to the Pratidin group. Prime News before its shut down was sold by Jeevan Surakhya group after two years of operation to Brahmaputra Infrastructure private limited, a real estate firm. DY365 although has been running since 2008, has had huge shift in its programming policy. It has completely stopped producing programmes in Hindi, English and Bengali, suggesting a change in its marketing policy. North East television the oldest satellite television which boasted of transmitting programme in record number of regional languages and dialects also faced temporary closure after internal fight over the control of the channel. This sort of development can never be a source of confidence to the journalist community in Assam.

Samudra Gupta Kashyap talking on the wage situation says “except for the Assam Tribune group and Prantik Magazine others do not have a structured salary or wage structure as such. So, everybody is insecure, except the Assam Tribune people all are insecure. They do not have benefits they do not have the benefits that come with a systematized salary structure. They do not have a mechanism within their media houses where they undergo in service training or orientation or refresher periodically. This I am talking about staffers and the desk people. And all those who are outside the state capital are poor stringers, very ill-paid. They get centimeter wise, how many centimeter of news have you generated. So these people mostly do local blackmailing.”

Paragmoni Aditya says with News Live’s arrival electronic media wages have improved “one thing more we (News Live) are paying regular salary to the staff and correspondents who are outside Guwahati and are
full fledged employee. Earlier in print media the correspondent used to get paid according to publication. Now we pay salary, and the correspondent is bound to report at any time whether it is 3 or 4 am 10 Celsius or 42 Celsius, he has to go where I command. Most of the television channels also do not follow this model till date.”

Santanu Bhuyan agrees about the hardships of journalists in Assam “people are passing out from Universities with Mass communication degrees they don’t have that dedication. Even if they are dedicated, after passing out sustenance is quite tough. It’s not all about money. The market is also not conducive, after the coming of electronic media the situation has improved a bit.” In fact electronic media has given hope to not only journalists but also a gamut of people associated with the process like camerapersons, editors, anchors. Their demand for personnel in the context of a fixed supply of, trained journalists has effectively widened the pool of media labor to include subjects from social backgrounds that hitherto would have excluded them from employment in the print media industry, where the minimum requirements of higher education and even literacy were met, historically, by a narrow group of national and regional elites (Rudra, 1989).

Samudra Gupta Kashyap points out that “there is lot of people waiting on the wings to become journalists. Students particularly in the small institutes, self styled journalism institutes, almost 18 to 20 in Guwahati. They are fleecing these people who are coming from the interiors and studying mass communication in Guwahati.” As Roy (2011: 767) says from the perspective of demand and supply equilibrium alone, the growth of the television news industry has necessitated an expansion of existing labor pools, and a concomitant revision of hiring practices in the historically elite, ‘intellectual’ profession of journalism.
Since the 1990’s a total of 19 journalists have been killed in Assam. Reporting from a state where militancy was rampant in the 1990’s the reporters faced risk of lives at every step. It is no wonder that most of these journalists were killed by one or the other militant group. Parag Das was an executive editor of *Asomiya Pratidin* at the time of his killing, and it is fairly open knowledge that he was an ULFA ideologue. The second editor killed earlier this year was the owner of a newspaper known to be a mouthpiece of the ULFA when he bought it (Ninan, 2009). Anil Mazumdar, the Editor of *Aji* was gunned down in Guwahati city itself.

4.9 Television Rating Points (TRP’s)

After the entry of News Live and DY365, the race for revenues has heated up. So, the need for a separate rating agency was felt. The advertisers too did not have any reliable means of gauging where they were putting their money in. Media in Assam is completely dependent on the advertising revenue. The closure of Prime News is a case in point, where it could not sustain itself without advertising. Prime News was not available on any Direct to Home (DTH) platform and thus had to rely on local cable networks for distribution. For this purpose the cable networks charge a huge sum as carriage fees. In September, 2013 Prime News was totally blacked out by the cable operators for three weeks as the carriage fees was unpaid. The television ratings virtually bottomed out and advertising were hard to come by. As there was no other source of revenue other than advertisements, the channel faced closure. This complex gamut of media operations in Assam says a lot about the clout of advertisers, Television Rating Points (TRP’s) and cable networks.

But, Samudra Gupta Kashyap criticizes the concept of TRP’s “they do not know who the audiences are. They do not have a mechanism of
TRP. Although everybody talks about it there is no system. You cannot create this all on hear-say and guesswork that advertisement this is popular and this is not popular. There is Television Audience Measurement, but I have not seen any machine yet. So they randomly try to find out who are speaking about what. So the content has been more politically driven because most of these people have instantly become journalists producing news. They do not have a content schedule as such.” Media often compete with one another. There are numerous examples every day in the press of what Edwin Newman has called ‘flagrant examples of cheap scare journalism’ (Schmuhl, 1989).

There is criticism from the industry itself, TRP is often construed as something which can be bought for money. Anybody willing to spend money can increase their TRP’s. News Times’s Pratap Bordoloi opines “TRP is only Guwahati specific if there are 2 lakh people watching television only 150 TRP box are there, how it is justified? And there are some middlemen who manage TRP’s. Some people who came when we started said if you pay one crore we will make you no. 1 in 1-2 months. After I rejected I saw the result instead, my TRPs went down then again slowly it went up due to the efforts of my staff.” How much of it happens is an arguable matter, but the future of the channels depends on these data.

With a population of over 30 million spread over 29 districts Assam is a multifarious land. Whereas the TRP data is gathered only from Guwahati as Pranjal Phukan opines “Guwahati based news get more priority during prime time, because there is something called TRP’s related with it. Although TRP should be supported or not is a contentious issue, media managers are concerned with it as advertisement revenue depends on it. Satellite channels in Assam are free-to-air channels, and to keep these channels functioning a big amount is required and advertisement are the only source of income for the channels, these advertisements agencies look at the TRP’s to award advertisements, so the
channels are dependent on TRP’s. So, if the channels don’t go after TRP’s there will be lesser advertisements, revenue would come down as a result shutting of channels.” He cites the Achilles heels of the present system of running satellite channels in Guwahati. Even if the channels want they cannot reach the interior areas of the state, or the financial commonsense dissuades them from doing so. Because it is Guwahati which brings in the revenues, it is Guwahati where the advertisers are situated and it is in Guwahati where all the TRP boxes are located.

Print media professionals have always questioned the credibility of news of the television media. They accuse the television media to be driven by TRP and consequently advertising revenue, which compromises the quality of journalism. Prasanta Rajguru argues “electronic media is going very high as per as unhealthy practices are concerned. Again the corporate control is coming to the fore. It is all about TRP’s. TRP’s bring revenue so it is encouraged each time.”

Santanu Bhuyan of the now defunct Prime News says “our (Prime News) main idea was, will we be able to do something different from what the other channels are doing in Assam. Now you will see that small issues are inflated and presented but if you look at our programming we pay more focus on content. We are not in the TRP race. TRP is also important, if you don’t think about TRP’s, running a channel is impossible. Still now we are making content our prime focus.” He agrees to inflated news stories but his argument that they do not care about TRP’s is a misnomer, we now know the fate of Prime News not able to sustain itself due top lack of revenues.
4.10 The Way Forward

The media scenario in Assam is still in an evolutionary phase where media organizations are passing through a phase of consolidation. Barring a few hiccups, the emergence of the electronic media has been smooth. Journalists shifting jobs with better prospects has become commonplace, and one point of time lot of senior professional left their print sector jobs to join the electronic media. News media has led the growth of media in Assam, like other parts of the country. New audience has been created with the emergence of multiple edition newspapers, and electronic media has reached interior villages of the state. News media has in fact been the driving force for media’s growth across the country as can be seen from Table 2.

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</table>

Table 2: Consolidated list of news channels in India, 2000–10

Radhika Mohan Bhagwati says in the same breath “so, the qualities of the editors should not be academic but they should be good business managers. So MBA would be the qualification for a future editor. In Assam we are doing the same and going away from the tradition. The people of Assam and North East have the capacity to support more print and electronic media they are supporting newspapers in Assam. But we are not giving them back the desired product per se. We are giving them some stuff for our benefit. I am hopeful and disappointed at the same time. If we can rise up to the challenges then we can give the public sphere what they aspire for.” He is optimistic about the growth of media as a whole in the region and thinks it to be the purpose of the media to contribute to a healthy public sphere in the context of the liberalized economy.

Yet at the same time the commercialization troubles him and he bemoans the fall in importance of the public in the ideals of modern day journalism. Localization for him is a utopian concept where the public sphere becomes a commercialized entity. “The societal condition has completely changed in Assam particularly. You can divide the society pre and post 1998. The whole world impact (globalization) is coming to us. In the freedom movement in 1942 press was important. But after the Assam agitation things became different. The role for the society and the public has enlarged. Media is a public space and print has given the people that space. But this has changed post print. Electronic medium has taken away the space” says Radhika Mohan Bhagwati.

With the emergence of electronic media, news media in particular Assam transformed itself from a print society to a post-print set up. By creating a new constituency of readerships, localization has provided a voice for those who, until recently, were unable to effectively raise their concerns in the public sphere and remained at the margin of mainstream discourse (Neyazi, 2010: 920). The growth has indeed been driven by the
multiple editions that the newspapers started in the early 2000’s in Assam. And after the emergence of satellite television, media reached the nook and corner of the state. A new audience emerged, people living in Mancachar in Dhubri to the hills of Dima Hasao, from the bordering villages of Bangladesh in Cachar to the interior villages bordering Arunachal Pradesh, from the intellectual and educated society to the illiterate, from the middle class to the labourers nobody was untouched by the electronic media. But the creation of the audience did not ensure their participation. As we have seen in the case of Assam, localization meant a local audience but centralized content. The content of media remained biased towards Guwahati, both in print and electronic media. The forces of the market required a larger audience for profits, yet it did not want to make content for them. The ‘local’ became only a place to dump ‘globalised’ products in the terms of the new economic world order. The ‘local’ in Assam did not find a voice and a medium of its own.