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Muda Tariq

Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

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Impact of Political Economy on Press Freedom: A Study of News Media in Kashmir

Muda Tariq

Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

Abstract

Post the de-operationalization of Article 370 and bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir on 5 August 2019, the region was said to be put under a communication clampdown that severely impacted the functioning of the press. In this backdrop, the paper examines freedom of the press in Jammu and Kashmir, through two media publications: *The Rising Kashmir* and *The Kashmir Walla*. Using Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model as an analytical framework, the paper attempts to explore interlinks between press freedom and the political economy of media. Case studies of two news media publications with varied financial models are used to examine how the government policies – advertising and regulatory – impact the content of the news media. Based on the Propaganda Model, the paper makes an argument that the editorial policies of the press are governed majorly by the political economy.

Keywords: Press Freedom, Jammu and Kashmir, Propaganda Model, News Media, Article 370

Introduction

India was ranked 142 in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, making India one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists to be able to their professional duties.¹ Press freedom in India has been deteriorating over the past few years -in a pool of 180 countries, India has slipped ranks from 136 in 2017, 138 in 2018, and 140 in 2019, and to 142 in 2020 and 2021. India shares the 'bad classification' with countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Russia. An important contributor to this rather chequered record is the level of press freedom in conflict-ridden Jammu and Kashmir. As per the media watchdog, *International Press Institute*, media freedom in Kashmir is in a 'dramatic state of repression'.² The press in Kashmir works under tough conditions, navigating J&K government and the central government, their investigative agencies and paramilitary forces. As noted by Gautam Navlakha, the news media in J&K operates on "strict instructions from the police department which obliges them not to carry news of any "separatist" leader on their front page and if the news appears on an inside page its length is restricted to a column and a half".³ Altaf Hussain, senior journalist for the BBC, notes that since the inception of armed conflict in late 1980s, all the parties "wanted media to be on its side"⁴ – both militant groups and government thus has been exerting pressure on media in attempts to control it. In between, it's the press that continues to operate in a muzzled state.

The paper tries to provide the picture of the 'environment' – political, legal, and economic – in which the media in Kashmir operates. The 'legal' category encompasses examining laws and regulations put in place by the State that can influence the media content and to understand to what degree does it hamper the media's ability to operate freely. Here, we examine the policies vis-à-vis the press which can impact the content of news media. In the 'political' category, we locate the local press in Kashmir within the politics of the region. Given that Jammu and Kashmir is a conflict zone, the paper tries to understand how operating in a conflict zone makes the media susceptible to local politics, undermining press freedom, editorial independence, and the obstacles to reporting such as arbitrary detention and legal challenges. Here the *flak* filter of the Propaganda Model becomes important. In the 'economic' category, the paper tries to understand how government advertising, and the fear of its selective withholding, impact the content and sustainability of media. Thus, it tries to understand the linkages between political economy and freedom of the press, using the *advertising* filter of the Propaganda Model.

Methodologically, the paper takes a qualitative content analysis approach. To understand the impact of government advertising on the press content, the variables chosen are the editorials released by both the media houses post the abrogation of 370 in August 2019. The key themes looked at within these editorials are commentaries, if any, on the revocation of statehood and de-operationalization of Article 370, its legality and implications, and Media Policy 2020. To

¹ *India: Modi tightens his grip on the media | Reporters without borders*. RSF. (2021). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://rsf.org/en/india>.

² *Journalism in Kashmir in 'state of repression': Media watchdog*. Aljazeera.com. (2020). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/18/journalism-in-kashmir-in-state-of-repression-media-watchdog>.

³ Navlakha, G. (2011). Squeezing the Media in Kashmir. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(43), 5-5. Retrieved July 5, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23047226>

⁴ Kuchay, B. (2020). *Harassed, intimidated, detained: Why journalists in India's Kashmir are afraid of reporting the truth*. CNN. Retrieved 5 July 2021, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/04/media/kashmir-media-freedom-dst-hnk-intl/index.html>.

understand how the *flak* filter operates, the incident of Nawakadal gunfight in May 2020 has been chosen to understand the difference in reporting styles in the two papers, as the incident reporting drew *flak* from the government.

Chomsky and Herman's Propaganda Model

There's a general consensus that independent media is a prerequisite for a substantial democracy. There's a follow-up agreement that there exists a crisis in the press' ability to defend and advance democracy, as is also put forth by the Propaganda Model, which suggests media functions as a propaganda instrument for the government. The news media, especially in times of conflict, has a tendency to align itself with state propaganda.

In 1988, Herman and Chomsky co-authored *Manufacturing Consent*⁵ in which the Propaganda Model was used to examine how the mainstream media in the United States functioned. This model was "extended to the 'elite' and 'agenda-setting' media like CBS and the *New York Times*". The model's main argument is that the media is an economic institution whose performance is influenced by the market system in which it operates.⁶ The propaganda model is based on the premise that a "critical political economy will put forth and center the analysis of the locus of media control and the mechanisms by which the powerful are able to dominate the flow of messages and limit dissenting voices".⁷ The notion of manufactured consent is deeply ingrained, since citizens are kept in line with the ruling establishment in the same manner that totalitarian governments would employ violence or brute military force.

The Propaganda Model (PM) is based on five filters that impact media content, directly or indirectly, leading the media to function as propagandists.⁸ The first filter is *ownership*. Often, media houses are owned by giant corporations – it's their business interest, that of their executives and shareholders that tends to coincide with the interest of the ruling establishment. The media are unlikely to undermine these interests. The second filter is *advertising*. The news media has increasingly become profit-driven: the objective is to maximize the money-spending audience which gains the traction of *advertisers*. Thirdly, media houses heavily rely on official government *sourcing*. Since they exercise authority, they are deemed as credible. There is a careful control maintained over conditions in which the media is given access to bureaucratic and security personnel, reports, publications, press conferences, and related government public relations. The fourth filter is that of *flak*. There's a substantive fear in the media about the criticism and punishment that powerful news sources and government authorities impose on media and journalists who don't follow the government's script in their reportage. The final filter

⁵ Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2010). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Random House.

⁶ Boyd-Barret, O. (2004). Judith Miller, the New York Times and the Propaganda Model. *Journalism Studies* 5, no. 4 (2004): 435-449

⁷ Herman, E. S. (1999). *The myth of the liberal media: An Edward Herman reader* (Vol. 2). Peter Lang Pub Incorporated. Pg 267

⁸ Jackson, P. T., & Stanfield, J. R. (2004). The role of the press in a democracy: heterodox economics and the propaganda model. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 38(2), 475-482.

is an ideological one against anti-communism, later changed to global war on terror.⁹ However, the paper will be mainly focusing only on *Advertising* and *Flak* filters.

Media Repression in Kashmir

Media in Kashmir has been under constant attack under various regimes. The issues of press freedom and media censorship are not exclusive to authoritarian regimes and have been contested by citizens, governments and even the Supreme Court even in the Indian context. The lack of press freedom, transparency and accountability in the news media is likely to be accentuated in conflict zone, such as Kashmir, where national interests and border security dominate the discourse. Journalists in the region have always been struggling with the lack of press freedom in the state. Regimes have changed – from Maharaja Hari Singh to LG Manoj Sinha – but not much has changed for journalists working in Kashmir. Maharaja Pratap Singh, in 1904, not only refused to grant permission to Munshi Muhammad Din Fauq to launch a newspaper in Srinagar but also set regulations that would make it impossible to even consider such requests. Consequently, for the next three decades, newspapers were not officially in circulation in the valley.¹⁰ Post signing the Instrument of Accession with India, the press autonomy continued to be limited with the media content under scrutiny of the new establishment. This is illustrated by the publishing of poem *Ab Kashmir Ka* (Now of Kashmir) written by Munshi Biyabani, with words such as '*zulm* (tyranny), *sitam* (oppression), and *musalman* (Muslim)', by a local paper. The poem drew the attention of the authorities who deemed it unnecessary and politically inexpedient to take action against the paper as elections were due.¹¹ In 1989, National Conference and Congress regime brought "almost full censorship to Kashmir" after passing the Jammu and Kashmir Special Powers (Press) Bill.¹² In efforts to "contain separatist or militant communication", the Indian state over the years have imposed restrictions that amount to "complete closure" of "civil discourse."¹³ It highlights how the press and the media content have always been under the radar.

The scrutiny and the restrictions on the freedom of the press have only heightened after the removal of Article 370 in August 2019. There's now a greater doubt cast on the independence of the press in Jammu and Kashmir, especially after the unilateral and coercive revocation of Article 370 and statehood following which J&K was put under siege. These political changes were made after deployment of additional troops in already heavily militarized J&K, putting political leaders under house arrest and enforcing a communications blackout by severing mobile and internet services. The blackout crippled the local media as they couldn't publish stories. Journalists were neither able to get in touch with their sources, nor able to share information to the media houses and agencies outside the state. This only highlighted the compromised nature of press freedom in J&K.

⁹ Dieterich, H. (1985). Global U.S. State Terrorism: An Interview with Noam Chomsky. *Crime and Social Justice*, (24), 96-109. Retrieved June 21, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766271>

¹⁰ Ahmad, K. (2016). Kashmir's Media experience continuum. Kashmir Reader URL http://www.kashmirreader.com/2016/08/23/kashmirs-media-experience-continuum/?amp_markup=1 Retrieved on 3-7-2021

¹¹ Boga, D. (2020). A History of the State-Media Link in Kashmir. *Artha Journal of Social Sciences*, 19(3), 37-60

¹² Chitrlekha. (2014). Censorship for Counter-insurgency: Dilemmas for Citizenship in Kashmir. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(21), 55-58. Retrieved July 5, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24479552>

¹³ *ibid*

Media laws to a great degree have enabled censorship of sensitive information on the pretext of preserving peace, political stability, normalcy, and security.¹⁴ In 2020, the J&K administration approved the Media Policy 2020.¹⁵ The Policy notes, among other things, it aims to:

- “Ensure a synchronized and effective use of all forms of media to build public trust, foster a genuinely positive image of the Government based on performance and strengthen the relationship with key stakeholders.”
- “Thwart misinformation, fake news and be alert to any attempts to use media to incite communal passions, preach violence or to propagate any information prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India.”¹⁶

To this end, the Policy spells out ways in which the government aims to disseminate information, by holding press conferences and exhibitions, and by conducting guided tours. It also states that its focus would reduce from print and move towards outdoor publicity material, radio, audio-visuals, and online media. The policy aims to put in place “suitable mechanism to address issues of fake news, plagiarism, and verification of antecedents of all concerned with the profession”¹⁷. Pursuant to it, empanelment guidelines have been laid down that emphasize “before the empanelment of Newspapers/News Portals for release of advertisements by the Government, antecedents” of the paper/portal as well as that of publisher/editor will be thoroughly verified. Similarly, in finalizing accreditations that allow journalists to access government news media and its agencies, robust background checks of each journalist would be done. The policy also details the role of the Department of Information and Public Relations (DIPR) in J&K. It empowers DIPR to “examine the content of print, electronic and other forms of media for fake news, plagiarism, and unethical or anti-national activities.”¹⁸ Those indulging in such activities will be “de-empanelled besides being proceeded against under the law”. Similarly, any media that tends to incite violence, “question sovereignty and integrity of India”¹⁹, or violate any accepted norms of public decency and behavior will face similar consequences. It’s pertinent to note that in the absence of high commercial advertising in Kashmir makes newspapers largely dependent on revenues from government advertisements.

The Case of *Rising Kashmir* and *The Kashmir Walla*

The regional press in Kashmir dates its beginnings to the pre-1947 nationalist struggle in Kashmir, and it has continued to play an important role in regional political discourse. Protracted political conflict and strong regionalism are major reasons for its continued political significance. Within Kashmir’s press scenario, one finds both self-serving and public service visions of journalism in a competition.

When the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir began in the 1990s, many journalists left the valley, leaving local editors with the task of maintaining local publications. Local editors had

¹⁴ Kumar, L. R. (2017). Muscle or muzzle? A critical analysis of media, power and censorship in democratic India. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 13(1/2), 75–89.

¹⁵ Government of Jammu and Kashmir, Information Department, Civil Secretariat, J&K. (2020). *Media Policy 2020*. Jammu and Kashmir: Government Order No: 05-JK(ID) of 2020.

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

newer stories to report, which aided journalism's growth. The local media played an instrumental role in mediating the political discourse with lesser interference from the government.²⁰ In Jammu & Kashmir, this was also the beginning of English journalism. Until 1989, Srinagar had no daily English newspaper. A Kashmiri Pandit, Poshkar Nath Vakil, started *Samachar Post* as the first daily but he soon migrated. Subsequently, many English newspapers were launched from 1996.

In March 2008, *Rising Kashmir (RK)* hit the stands. *RK* is owned by Kashmir Media Group that also runs an Urdu daily *Buland Kashmir* and a Kashmiri language daily *Sangarmal*. *Rising Kashmir* was started by Syed Rafi-ud-Din Bukhari in 2007 and Syed Shujaat Bukhari remained its Founding Editor till he was assassinated on June 14, 2018. Bukhari's assassination was a major blow not only to the newspaper but the entire media fraternity in Kashmir. The very next day, *RK* hit the stands with full-page photograph of the assassinated editor-in-chief, sending across a message it would not be cowed down and would continue 'telling truth howsoever unpleasant it may be'.²¹

The newspaper under Bukhari's editorship covered diverse issues in J&K, particularly in the Kashmir region. Bukhari wrote that generating investment for *RK* wasn't easy, but the subsequent Amarnath land row came as a boon as they were able to make inroads in Kashmir's media landscape through their comprehensive coverage. However, 2010 unrest presented another challenge with a total loss of a whopping Rs 8000-crore for Kashmir's economy. In such circumstances, *RK* had to lay off the staff and cut down the number of pages from 12 to 8. Bukhari further wrote that in the *RK* newsroom discourse, freedom of ideas and expression was upheld religiously. He also wrote for *RK*, it was difficult to achieve an independent revenue model based on private advertisements for it relatively younger and *RK* often had to 'force a balance' between independence and 'subservience to information disseminated by the government'. Bukhari also reflects on being blacklisted for advertisements issued by the Department of Advertising & Visual Publicity (DAVP), Government of India as the paper was considered to be preaching secessionism. In 2010, the union home ministry had issued circulars to many "ministries and agencies to stop advertisements to three English newspapers" in J&K, including *RK*, for its alleged anti-India propaganda.²² Bukhari had written that media in Kashmir is 'forced to bleed and bear the losses'²³.

The Kashmir Walla

The Kashmir Walla was started as a personal blog in 2011 by a young journalist Fahad Shah. During the 2008-2010 uprisings, Shah felt that narratives from Kashmir were distorted in Indian and international media. It was only after that realization, Shah "reimagined *TKW* as a multimedia magazine covering political, social, and cultural dissent to bring context to what daily

²⁰ Ali, M (2012). Govt to review ban on cable. Greater Kashmir, 15 January. Available at [newshttp://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/news/govt-to-reviewban-on-cable-news/111640.html](http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/news/govt-to-reviewban-on-cable-news/111640.html)

²¹ *Rising Kashmir hits the stands with Shujaat Bukhari tribute on front page*. Hindustan Times. (2018). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rising-kashmir-hits-the-stands-with-shujaat-bukhari-tribute-on-front-page/story-oQ1ozcphoMAqPiMEc0cTWP.html>.

²² Pandey, Maneesh (2011): "Home Ministry Cracks Whip on Kashmiri Newspapers over 'Anti-India' News," India Today, 11 October, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/home-ministry-cracks-whip-on...>

²³ *ibid*

life is like in Kashmir”²⁴. Shah is a recipient of Human Rights Press Award 2021²⁵ and was also nominated by RSF for 2020’s prize for courage for the newspaper’s “important part in defending press freedom”.²⁶ Now *The Kashmir Walla* is an independent multimedia publication with prominent digital and print platforms, focused mainly on Jammu and Kashmir and its adjacent regions. *TKW* produces original reportage and analysis through text, audio, videos, and photos. *TKW*’s aim has been to bring out and amplify stories from the impact, and spillover, of conflict on people’s lives and the torn governance.

TKW launched its weekly newspaper in June 2019. Given the credibility *TKW* had online, Shah had projected with investor’s money and local commercial advertising, it would have been profitable. Just a month later, in August 2019, Kashmir was put into a communications blockade which rendered their website defunct, plunged their 50% finances from advertising revenue to zero, and their online traffic went to zero overnight.²⁷ Although *TKW* staff continued going outside the valley to publish editorials and reports, but they couldn’t fully resume office until November 2019. After that, they devised a new business model, focusing on grants and membership. As an editorial policy, *TKW* doesn’t seek out government advertisements. It subsequently received a grant from Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international body working for freedom of right to information that helped it to sustain. The first installment of the grant was received in June 2020 which kept the organization alive and strengthened them. *TKW*, seeking sustainability in the long run, launched a membership model. For *TKW*, the membership model is their “best bet at survival”²⁸. Exclusively for their member, it has started a weekly newsletter – *This Week in Kashmir* – and a first of a kind podcast in the valley, covering a diverse range of topics--from women-centric issues, the legal impunity accorded to armed forces committing human rights violations in Kashmir, to how the Indian media plays a role in strengthening an anti-Kashmir narrative. For Rs 2999, readers can do an annual subscription to the paper as members and can attend monthly roundtables and conference calls with the editorial board. Shah believes that it’s not just the content that people are paying for, but ‘the idea behind it and the credibility’ that *TKW* has gained due to its reportage.²⁹ *TKW* now has over 200 members; it operates 12+ WhatsApp groups with 2500 members; and gets about a million page views a month. It also gained a considerable following on its social media handles.

The two organizations have been selected for the study on the following common parameters: both are local media organizations and have decades of experience operating in Jammu and Kashmir. The medium of language of both the papers is English and are fairly among the popular news media organizations in the valley. Since these two papers adopt two different economic models, with *Rising Kashmir* having an advertising-based financial model and *The*

²⁴Tameez, H. (2020). *One year after India cracked down on Kashmir, The Kashmir Walla turns to membership to survive*. Nieman Lab. Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/08/one-year-after-india-cracked-down-on-kashmir-the-kashmir-walla-turns-to-membership-to-survive/>.

²⁵ *Kashmir Walla editor wins Human Rights Press award*. The Kashmir Walla. (2021) Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2021/05/kashmir-walla-editor-wins-human-rights-press-award/>.

²⁶ *Kashmir Walla editor nominated for RSF's 2020 Press Freedom Award*. The Kashmir Walla. (2020). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/11/kashmir-walla-editor-nominated-for-rsfs-2020-press-freedom-award/>.

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

Kashmir Walla having a free-press grant and subscription model, the two papers fitted well into the study.

Media in the Aftermath of Article 370

Post the abrogation of Article 370 and revocation of statehood, the government started giving full page advertisements on the front pages of prominent Kashmir dailies, including *RK*, urging the people to resume ‘normal’ life³⁰ and to “enlighten people about the benefits” of revocation of special status³¹. Satya Pal Malik, the then Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, had revealed the government was planning to launch an ‘awareness campaign’ on Article 370. The ads in this period list out the benefits of the revocation for the people of J&K, focusing on the development narrative, with the tagline “A single constitution for the entire country. How will Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh benefit?”³² Many of these advertisements also alleged that the Hurriyat leadership, that sent ‘their children to exotic lands, was ‘instigating common people to push their children into violence’. Some ads also focus on gender discrimination with the message that “women will now retain full and legal rights on land and other rights.” The state government paid around Rs 60,000 to more than one lac per day to the prominent newspapers publishing these full-page ads.³³ This advertisement blitzkrieg came at a time, when there was an on-going crackdown on the media in Kashmir, whereby the local press had been “tamed” and coerced to adopt self-censorship.³⁴

Pertinently, after the mainstream newspapers, such as *Greater Kashmir* and *Rising Kashmir*, restarted printing in August 2019, the page numbers had been slashed, content had considerably changed. Sajjad Hussain notes that “there were no detailed reports, no investigative pieces, no editorials, no analysis and definitely no opinion pieces.”³⁵ Commenting on news media having been reduced to propagandists, he further notes “every report was a government version”.³⁶ To stay afloat, the mainstream papers resorted to the revenue from government advertising. Raashid Maqbool, a media scholar, also noted that “advertising has long been used as a means of repression and coercion, the situation as worsened for local media since August 2019.”³⁷

To understand the impact of advertising on the media content, we will be analyzing the editorials of *RK* and *TKW*. An editorial is a newspaper article sanctioned by the editor’s publisher/editor and reflects the viewpoints and editorial policies of the paper. As opposed to

³⁰ Maqbool, M. (2019). *J&K government goes on advertisement blitz to urge restoration of ‘normal’ in Valley*. National Herald. Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/jandk-government-goes-on-advertisement-blitz-to-urge-restoration-of-normal-in-valley>.

³¹ Ehsan, M. (2019). *J-K government launches advertisement blitzkrieg on ‘benefits’ of abrogation of Article 370*. Hindustan Times. Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/j-k-government-launches-advertisement-blitzkrieg-on-benefits-of-abrogation-of-article-370/story-VRRbT2wUsQylUisUEu10N.html>.

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

news and feature writing, editorials are unsigned institutional opinions on issues and events.³⁸ Editorials are a product of the organization, not just the writing of an individual. It's a subjective viewpoint, but over time, the editorial scope has considerably widened. It's no longer just reflective of editor's opinions, but its function is "to inform, interpret, evaluate, extrapolate, suggest, criticize, persuade, and guide in the new age of information".³⁹ Pertinently, a free and independent press has its own editorial policies to follow – both in theory and praxis.

Rising Kashmir avoided any coverage on the aftermath of revocation of Article 370 – no coverage at all was given to the implications of communications blockade, the months-long lockdown, and the hardship that Kashmiris were subjected to. On the 5th of August itself, the editorial piece by *RK* is titled 'Educational Facilities'.⁴⁰ The piece makes a fleeting reference to "deteriorating "security" situation in Kashmir" and the "uncertainties" that have caused the work days to shrink. It also talks about the adverse conditions in government educational institutions – both in terms of facilities available and outcomes. On the same day, *TKW* comes out with the editorial 'Think of Kashmiris, not just Kashmir'⁴¹, with the sub-headline "Now, this time if the assumption of the people for Article 35A in the current turmoil comes true, the repetitive mention of term *Kashmiriyat* in their speeches will vanish." The piece reflects on the historical legality of Article 370, what it signifies, the on-going developments with more than 38,000 troops sent to the valley, the anxieties of people on the ground, and the palpable fears and implications of such policy.

RK stopped publishing any editorials between 6 August and 20 November, 2019. In the same time frame, *TKW* published 3 editorials – two in October 2019, and one on 4 November, 2019. On 21 October, more than a month after revocation, the editorial titled 'Kashmir's Imbalanced Political Space'⁴² was published by the *TKW* editorial board. The piece calls upon the Centre, here New Delhi, to give 'space to Kashmiris in deciding their political space, in every dimension' to balance the region's instability. It highlights the sense of betrayal and hopelessness felt by the imprisoned political leaders and political workers, let alone the Kashmiri population they propagated the ideas of "achievable nationhood" to. On 29 October, *TKW* came out with another editorial titled 'Ambiguous Future of Reorganized Kashmir'⁴³ with the sub-headline 'from here, it is black and white – it's only Delhi and Delhi; not Kashmir.' The piece refers to how the government has been propagating the benefits of repealing special status through front-page advertisements but also reflects on how there has always been a 'suspicion of what the establishment tries to sell' among masses in Kashmir.

³⁸ Shabir, G., Khan, A. W., Adnan, M., & Safdar, G. (2014). A Comparative Analysis of the Editorials of 'The Nation and 'The News': The Case Study of Pak-India Relations Issues (2008-2010). *Journal of Political Studies*, 21(1).

³⁹ Fico, F. (1986). Influence of perceived editorial concern and role concept on source reliance, *Journalism quarterly*, 63(2), p.322-330

⁴⁰ Editorial | *Education Facilities*. *Risingkashmir.com*. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from https://risingkashmir.com/home/news_description/355598/Education-facilities.

⁴¹ Editorial | *Think of Kashmiris, not just Kashmir*. *The Kashmir Walla*. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2019/08/editorial-think-of-kashmiris-not-just-kashmir/>.

⁴² Editorial: *Kashmir's imbalanced political space*. *The Kashmir Walla*. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2019/10/editorial-kashmir-s-imbalanced-political-space/>.

⁴³ Editorial | *Ambiguous Future of Reorganised Kashmir*. *The Kashmir Walla*. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2019/10/editorial-ambiguous-future-of-reorganised-kashmir/>.

The policy changes by the Centre came into effect from 31 October, 2019. On November 4, *TKW*'s editorial board published another editorial titled 'A new beginning or the same old school?'⁴⁴. The piece comments on installation of Girish Chandra Murmu as the Lieutenant Governor, disallowing of annual *Khoje-Digar* prayers amidst continued restrictions, and the guided tour of European Union's delegation to propagate the notion of normalcy in Kashmir. It highlights how these moves might be helpful for 'short-term political gains', but doesn't help in gaining trust on the ground. *RK*, after a months-long break, published an editorial on November 20, 2019 on 'Illegal Constructions'⁴⁵. It highlights the corruption within the government apparatuses that have allowed for illegal constructions to come up in the Srinagar city. *RK* refrained from writing on anything even remotely related to abrogation of Article 370 and its implications on the ground. Post that the editorials seem to be focusing on comparatively softer issues such as education, social reform, gender equality, drug menace, and environment, but avoided anything majorly critical of the government's move. In March, *RK* in its editorial calls for restoration of 4G services⁴⁶, however it's based on concerns of education and healthcare amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and doesn't comment on how arbitrary the communications restrictions had been.

Similarly, after the Media Policy 2020 was announced in June 2020, *RK* didn't publish a single editorial denouncing the policy. It is pertinent to note that *RK*'s online editor, Irfan Amin Malik, faced state abuse after the revocation of Article 370 when he was picked by the armed forces nine days after August 5, without any explanations and was questioned. Although Malik, denounces the media policy in his individual capacity and deems it against "whatever he was taught about media freedom and ethics"⁴⁷, however, the paper per se didn't denounce, not even through an opinion piece. *RK* continued publishing editorials on the lines of gender, Pashmina, rural development and related themes, but avoided any coverage of the Media Policy, despite outrage from media fraternity as well as political parties such as the National Conference. In contrary, *TKW* published an editorial calling for revoking the "Orwellian Media Policy"⁴⁸, mentioning how the policy had put the media in Kashmir in "total disarray", with many media houses resorting to "self-censorship to avoid the wrath of Orwellian overloads." In the same editorial, *TKW* stressed that despite being a small independent media organization, we would be 'holding the line' and upholding the freedom of press. It noted that the media policy institutionalized the "established practice employed by consecutive governments to muzzle the press in Kashmir." *TKW* also wrote a three-page-letter⁴⁹ to Kashmir's only elected media body –

⁴⁴ Editorial: *A new beginning or the same old school?*. The Kashmir Walla. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2019/11/editorial-a-new-beginning-or-the-same-old-school/>.

⁴⁵ Editorial: *Illegal Constructions*. Rising Kashmir. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from https://risingkashmir.com/home/news_description/355622/Illegal-constructions

⁴⁶ Editorial: *Restore 4G Service*. Rising Kashmir. (2019). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from https://risingkashmir.com/home/news_description/358170/Restore-4G-service

⁴⁷ Malik, I., & R, M. (2020). *Jammu & Kashmir: Press freedom in the line of fire*. Indian Cultural Forum. Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://indianculturalforum.in/2020/12/30/jammu-kashmir-press-freedom-irfan-malik-interview/>.

⁴⁸ Editorial: *Revoke Orwellian Media Policy, Let Journalists Do Their Job*. The Kashmir Walla. (2020). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/08/revoke-orwellian-media-policy-let-journalists-in-kashmir-do-their-job/>

⁴⁹ *Letter on Media Policy by The Kashmir Walla*. Thekashmirwalla.com. (2020). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Letter-on-media-policy-by-The-Kashmir-Walla.pdf>.

Kashmir Press Club – urging it to formulate urgent and concrete steps to force the withdrawal of the media policy.

In the political economy of Indian Media, we have seen higher level manipulation of news, analysis, and commentary to suit the ruling economic and political interests, devaluation of editorial function, systemic dumbing down and the willingness to tailor the contents so as to be subservient to the advertising.⁵⁰ The Propaganda Model also suggests that media is “drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information”⁵¹, within the government apparatuses, by economic necessity. The lack of criticality in local dailies was also established in a report by the Network of Women in Media, India and the Free Speech Collective which read: “there is an absence of critical editorial voices in major Kashmiri newspapers.”⁵² A Kashmiri journalist, requesting anonymity, told *International Press Institute*⁵³ that the “lack of critical coverage” and editorials is also because of the “media's dependency on the governments for advertisements”. Given that the two papers have differential financial models, there seems to be a stark difference in their respective approaches. *RK* avoided any editorials that were politically controversial or might have drawn flak from the government, whereas *TKW* pro-actively published editorials critiquing the government – challenging the narrative of normalcy in Kashmir and also holding it accountable for the new Media Policy.

We will be attributing *flak* filter to the State which uses flak and negative feedback as a means of disciplining the media to fall in line. To successfully sideline it, the media also tends to engage in self-censorship. To understand how the flak filter operates, we will be taking the reportage of the two papers on the Nawakadal gunfight on 19th May 2020. The next day, *RK* covered two stories on the issue on its front page. The first one has the headline “*Sehrai's son among two HM militants killed in Srinagar Gunfight*”⁵⁴, the other reads “*DGP visits Army Hospital, enquires about injured personnel's health.*” The first story is descriptive in nature. It outlines the details of the gunfight as 15-hour-long and the killing of two militants, one of whom, Junaid Sehrai, is the son of Chairman of Tehreek-e-Hurriyat - a separatist conglomerate. It quotes a senior police officer for details of the gunfight, weapons recovered from the site, and the three injured security personnel. It further notes that several houses were damaged in the gunfight and that the area was sealed off. It also quotes the police chief, Dilbag Singh, from his press conference on the gunfight in Srinagar. The second story is about DGP Dilbag Singh visiting the injured personnel at 92 Base Army Hospital BB Cantonment. *TKW* also reports the same details, however, in another story *TKW* titled “*Srinagar Gunfight: At least 15 houses destroyed*”⁵⁵, it quotes locals and reports that “fifteen houses were destroyed in the gunfight” in the Kanimazar neighborhood of Nawakadal. In the same story, *TKW* goes on to report how the security forces

⁵⁰ Ram, N. (2011). The changing role of the news media in contemporary India. *Indian History*.

⁵¹ Jackson, P. T., & Stanfield, J. R. (2004). The role of the press in a democracy: heterodox economics and the propaganda model. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 38(2), 475-482.

⁵² Murthy, L., & Seshu, G. (2019). Silence in the Valley: Kashmiri Media after the Abrogation of Article 370. *Economic Political Weekly Engage*, 54(43).

⁵³ Heikura, M. (2020). *Journalism in Kashmir: State of repression - International Press Institute*. International Press Institute. Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://ipi.media/journalism-in-kashmir-state-of-repression/>.

⁵⁴ *Rising Kashmir*. (2021). E-Paper. 20 May.2021 Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <http://epaper.risingkashmir.com/>

⁵⁵ *Srinagar gunfight: At least 15 houses destroyed*. The Kashmir Walla. (2021). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/05/srinagar-gunfight-at-least-15-houses-destroyed/>.

had ‘beaten young children, vandalized the houses’, and even ‘stolen cash, jewellery, and cylinders.’ It covers the same in a video report, published on the same day, focusing on the locals of the area.

Following the story, the next day, i.e., 20 May 2020, *TKW* editor was summoned by police for their Srinagar gunfight coverage. The officials had expressed objections to *TKW*’s coverage of the Nawakadal gunfight, while simultaneously had questioned the editor about his educational background, career and social media posts. The officials “accused the organization of maligning the police’s reputation”.⁵⁶ In their response, *TKW* had asserted that the report was a compilation of the interviews of local residents and if the police differed, they would have given them equal space, but there was no clarification from the official end. *TKW*’s editor, Fahad Shah, was summoned by Srinagar police in July 2020, and was ordered to appear for questioning in connection with the Nawakadal reporting. The formal summons reads “your presence is necessary for the purpose of inquiry into the offence committed under section 147, 307, 109, 501, 505 IPC”.⁵⁷ In their statement, *TKW* noted that these summons were attempts to intimidate and silence journalists and urged the authorities to “allow them to carry on their professional duties”.⁵⁸

In their respective coverage, *RK* and *TKW* followed different styles of reporting. *RK*’s reportage is primarily descriptive in nature, while by conducting interviews of the locals, *TKW* adopted an investigative style of reporting. *RK* avoided drawing flak from the government, thus didn’t report about the vandalism and loot by the security personnel for such reporting would not have only drawn legal charges (as in the case of *TKW*) but would have led to subsequent de-panels of the newspaper.

News sources are an important element in journalistic coverage of international conflicts as it helps the journalists understand the issues and brings out the nuances.⁵⁹ News production is also highly influenced by who the sources are and how they report an event. The lack of access to local sources, pressure from the government and national interests often result in prioritizing government officials as primary news sources during a conflict.⁶⁰ As per the annual report of *Jammu and Kashmir Coalition for Civil Society*⁶¹, in 2019, journalists were coerced to “heavily rely on press briefs issues once or twice” by the State administration. Given the communications

⁵⁶ Statement: *The Kashmir Walla* editor summoned by police over Srinagar gunfight coverage. *The Kashmir Walla*. (2021). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/05/statement-the-kashmir-walla-editor-summoned-by-police-over-srinagar-gunfight-coverage/>.

⁵⁷ Statement: *Fresh summons issued to Kashmir Walla editor over Srinagar gunfight coverage*. *The Kashmir Walla*. (2021). Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/07/statement-fresh-summons-issued-to-kashmir-walla-editor-over-srinagar-gunfight-coverage/>.

⁵⁸ Staff Scroll. (2021). *J&K: ‘Journalism is not a crime’, says ‘The Kashmir Walla’ after police again summon its editor*. *Scroll.in*. Retrieved 2 July 2021, from <https://scroll.in/latest/967069/j-k-journalism-is-not-a-crime-says-the-kashmir-walla-after-police-again-summon-its-editor>.

⁵⁹ Kothari, A. (2010). The framing of the Darfur conflict in the *New York Times*: 2003–2006. *Journalism Studies*, 11(2), 209-224.

⁶⁰ McQueen, D. (2008). BBC’s Panorama, war coverage and the “Westminster consensus.” *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture*, 5(3), 47–68.

⁶¹ Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS). (2019). *Annual Human Rights Review 2019*. Srinagar: Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society & Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (31 December 2019). Retrieved from <https://www.jkccs.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-Annual-Human-Rights-Review.pdf>

blockade, they were unable to verify the stories. Another journalist told *IPI*⁶² that the concerned officials don't even bother "speaking to journalists for any official confirmation" and once the story is filed, they accuse journalists of reporting only one side of the story. Studying western news media practices, many scholars have pointed out that journalists' dependence on official governmental sources for information leads to distorted news. As has been found by McQueen⁶³, this distortion of news is inclined in favor of the ruling interests. There's a high chance that lies and pro-regime opinions might be communicated as the news by official sources, with journalists having limited or no access in such circumstances to verify. Powerful elites and the government can manipulate the neutrality of media outlets, given the undue reliance of journalists on "official sources, mainstream representatives and political experts."⁶⁴ This results in news media serving as mouthpiece of the government and in the underrepresentation of the local population, which already is bearing the brunt of a communications blackout.

Conclusion

Through the operations of the filters of *advertising, flak, and sourcing*, as elucidated in the Propaganda Model, in Jammu and Kashmir, we have seen how the news media tends to play an instrumental role in pro-actively supporting the government propaganda in conflicts, especially when the government in question is an important stakeholder in the conflict. Since the news media plays a role in shaping the context and expectation of the citizenry, it must also reflect the concerns of the locals. While it's the news media's function to share the government narratives, it must also increase the diversity of the content to strengthen democracy and to uphold spaces required to voice dissent and debate. The media has to be balanced in its approach, especially in conflict-zones, as otherwise such top-down representation tends to privilege actors and narratives that are in line with the state interests and aren't reflective of the narratives of other parties in conflict. The analysis of the two news media organizations clearly shows that governmental policies, in particular the advertising policy, can heavily influence reporting styles and the content. The freedom of press in Kashmir is in a compromised state and media performance has been subject to the political economy of media, as has been postulated by Chomsky and Herman in the Propaganda Model.

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ *ibid*

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