

# M3: MAN, MALE MASCULINE



## Staging Aggressive Masculinity Report of a Media Monitoring Project

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# Staging aggressive masculinity

## Report of a Media Monitoring Project

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# 1. Introduction

From homilies such as “boys don’t cry” and exhortations like “act like a man” to pervasive associations of qualities such as bravery, patriotism and strength with manhood, social and cultural norms have naturalised and even valorised the performance of aggressive and overbearing masculinities across spheres, the most visible being politics and the media. Such performances, normalised through repetition and circulation through a variety of professional, public and private networks, have serious implications for gender relations, apart from severely limiting the possibility of cooperative, empathetic dialogue. The media – news, entertainment, and social networks – are among the primary sites of reinforcement of such performances, vitiating an already polarised and embattled public sphere.

The media today – particularly television – are characterised by an atmosphere of aggression and competitive intimidation. We see men (and women) shouting to get ahead in the race for attention and Television Rating Points (TRPs). The aggression emanating from the newsrooms is reflected on the streets and even in homes, pushing out and silencing non-aggressive, collaborative/cooperative ways of being and interacting. Social sanctions in support of ‘aggression’ for the ‘right cause’, with men in leadership positions also encouraging such aggression, overtly or tacitly; the limited female presence in the political sphere; the impunity and reverence enjoyed by individuals and groups indulging in violence such as lynching, and so on, signal the fact that such hostile and violent behaviour is not only tolerated but widely accepted. As one team member working on this project noted, “Indian democracy’s shift towards majoritarianism is a distinctly masculine project. It is predicated on a patriarchal articulation of the state’s strength; the suppression of dissent; and the violent othering of those who are marginalised. Such attitudes are reflected and propagated in the country’s weakening institutions, and the mainstream news media is no exception.”

New technologies have facilitated easy circulation of aggressive content on social media. The high level of aggression on social media normalises toxic masculinity, encouraging many men to drop their inhibitions and ‘perform’ their masculinities. Visible and vocal women – journalists, human rights defenders, artists and celebrities – are routinely targeted with sexist, casteist and racist abuse, often accompanied by threats of violence, especially sexual

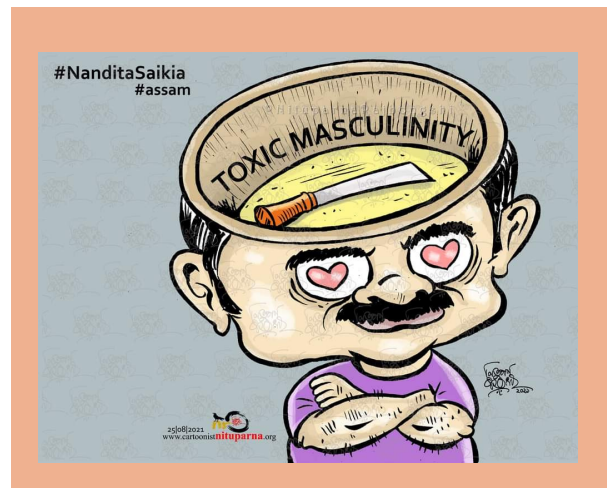
violence. Far from being silenced and intimidated, many women and members of religious and sexual minorities are fighting back, negotiating tricky terrain between taking action against misogyny and sexism online and upholding the right to freedom of expression in the digital space.

While such movements do find allies among men in media and elsewhere, much more needs to be done to change not only our behaviours but our attitudes towards each other. This is an issue that goes beyond gender parity to changing the terms of engagement – and the very frameworks that define what it means to engage: with each other, within our professions, and within society at large. This is a conversation that is many decades old, as old as the struggle against patriarchy, now brought into fresh relief by the convergence of other oppressive ideologies, including hyper-nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism and casteism, all of which link in essential ways with masculinities. Tied to each of these -isms, masculinity becomes a hegemonic and eventually toxic force that serves to entrench existing hierarchies and modes of being. Can there not be positive expressions of the qualities we associate with being good, human, strong, courageous, and/or competent, that do not require aggression, domination and othering? Can there not be an affective language that draws from humanism? What we seek to offer is not a critique of those who identify as men, but rather of the hegemonic, and ultimately toxic, associations of masculinity with aggression, dominance, misogyny and, finally, violence. Such assertions have the effect of oppressing all those on the other side of this power equation, irrespective of gender.



These issues are undeniably linked to a broader crisis in the media. The capitulation of much of the mainstream media to political and business interests is near complete, with only a few television channels and a handful of newspaper groups and digital news outlets holding on to some measure of independence. While the current political dispensation thrives on the stoking of insecurities – based on identities of different kinds – the insistence from business interests on serving the financial bottom line has created a media environment that has less to do with journalism than with theatre.

Against this backdrop, the Masculinities in the Media project, a collaboration between the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi, and the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI), is an attempt to understand how hegemonic and toxic masculinities are performed in news media, specifically television. The project is part of the larger M3: Man, Male, Masculine project launched by the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan. A granular understanding of behaviours that routinely convey aggression (as opposed to assertion on the basis of evidence), dominance (as opposed to negotiation and cooperation), and sexism (as opposed to gender inclusion and respect), could allow us to formulate and promote alternative expressions of professionalism



through example, training and mentorship. This report describes the outcome of a multi-site study involving 27 NWMI volunteers who monitored journalistic performance of masculinities on prime-time television news and talk shows in multiple Indian languages, including English. The study also undertook a limited analysis of social media posts to understand how masculinist discourse played out in these networks. Our analysis is placed within the broader academic debates and understandings of masculinities and is, accordingly, prefaced by a review of selected literature. Finally, we draw on our learning from the exercise to offer a set of recommendations and points for further discussion and exploration.



Created in 2015 by Karan Acharya, a 29-year-old graphic designer, the 'Angry Hanuman' image went viral, on buses, car windscreens, walls and T-shirts, replacing the more common image of a benevolent monkey god from the epic Ramayana.

## 2. Background and Review of Literature

### Defining masculinity

It is challenging to arrive at a definition of masculinity. Any attempt to define the term would have to clarify what it implicitly assumes about gender, and the cultural standpoint from which the definition emerges. Additionally, there is a distinction to be made between the terms “masculinity” and “masculinities” (Beynon, 2002), with the former representing a singular, normative and/or essentialist definition of masculine behaviours and practices, and the latter referring to the multiple and separate “sets of behaviours, attitudes, and abilities exhibited by individuals who are masculine in that particular way” (Clatterbaugh, 1998, p. 27).

Australian sociologist R.W. Connell in *Masculinities* (2005) traces the beginning of conceptualisations of masculinity to psychoanalytic thinking from Freud, who argued that the Oedipal Complex—the experience of young boys feeling desire for the mother and rivalry against the father—represents “a formative moment in masculinity” (p. 9). Connell points out that it was not until the late 1890s that a more sociological explanation of masculinity was sought. Much of the early sociological work focused on “sex difference”—the gendered variation in ability, emotions, attitudes, interests and other psychological characteristics. This line of inquiry led to the generation of the term “sex roles”:

[B]eing a man or a woman means enacting a *general* [original emphasis] set of expectations which are attached to one's sex—the ‘sex role’. In this approach there are always two sex roles in any cultural context, a male one and a female one. Masculinity and femininity are quite easily interpreted as internalized sex roles, the products of social learning or ‘socialization’ (p. 22).

This definition was greatly destabilised by feminist thinkers and writers, and the concept of sex roles was rejected for its “ethnocentrism, lack of power perspective, and incipient positivism” (Connell et al., 2005, p. 5). Feminist thinkers politicised the question of sex roles, and foregrounded the inherent power relationship in these roles—one that always involved domination and oppression of the feminine by the masculine (Carrigan et al., 1985).

Additionally, the fixity of gender as a category was brought into question. Sex and gender came to be thought of as separate categories—with sex

corresponding to the biological characteristics one is born with, and gender as a cultural construction that is “neither innate nor necessarily stable” (Wood, 2008, p. 23). The instability of gender as a category meant that it was signified through the adoption of practices whose meanings were culturally shared. Coe et al (2007) wrote, “people are constructed as masculine by positioning themselves, or by positioning others, as embodying a set of cultural practices and expressions that carry the currency of manhood” (p. 33).

### Masculinity in crisis?

Scholars are of the opinion that the need to define and study the nuances of masculinity stems partially from the general understanding, prevalent in late 20th century and early 21st century Western societies, that masculinity is in “crisis”. The crisis, according to Australian theorist David Buchbinder (2013), is a reaction to the changing cultural understandings of what it means to be a man, and what masculinity is, in the context of several socio-political changes in society at the time. Attributed to the second-wave feminism of the 1960s-70s and the civil rights movements in the West, which located the problem of gender relations in the “dominance and power of white, middle-class, heterosexual males” and sought to reform the same, the crisis is marked by a certain panic/anxiety about the transformation of traditional gender roles, which allegedly leads to men being weak, degenerate and effeminate (Lemon, 1992).

According to Levant (1997), the crisis is visible as men, accustomed to and comfortable with performing gender-stereotyped roles within marriage, increasingly lose their traditional good provider role. Some turn into

the defensive “angry white male” typically found in several men’s rights movements in the West that are believed to have come into being as a response to feminist movements of the 1970s. Buchbinder argues that this response continues today in consistent calls for the “toughening up” of men—visible, for instance, in novel, muscular exercise regimens (Gilleard and Higgs, 2013, p. 136) and growing discussions about this “crisis” in popular media. Popular media have played their own role in asserting that this crisis exists: “[their] script follows a familiar format in which particular social issues are selected: the absent father, the violent football fan or the underachieving male student, for example” (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003, p.7). More recently, in the Indian context, certain expressions of masculinity seem to emerge from a cultural anxiety about alien (un-Indian) others threatening the Hindu nation and requiring a muscular response from those who would guard it. This is termed “anxious masculinity” (Anand, 2007, cited in Subramanian, 2019), emerging as a backlash when progressive or more secular elements gain a degree of visibility in society.

## Gender performativity

There is a broad consensus that modern notions of gender (predominantly Western) go back as far as the late 17th and early 18th centuries, marked by the Industrial Revolution, part of a time period often called the Age of Reason or Enlightenment. This period facilitated a certain binary mode of thinking which privileged certain concepts over others: for instance, reason was considered the ultimate truth and norm, and superior to emotion. In terms of gender binaries, reason and intellect were attributed to men, while emotion and feeling were attributed to women. This resulted in the gradual relegation of women in the gender hierarchy to being the “Other” to men (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 6). Similarly, in the context of the Industrial Revolution, men sought work in public spaces, which led to the formation of a public sphere, while women were expected to look after affairs at home, which was later understood as a private sphere. This also meant that the heteronormative family (man as husband and woman as wife) became the ideal mode of existence, privileged above other modes of being and living together in society.

Osella and Osella (2006), through their specific study of South Asian masculinities, have observed that the production of the “hegemonic ideal family form”- with men at the centre of it as the “modern breadwinner”- becomes the dominant mode of masculinity in the 20th

century. It may be noted that, from this period onwards, “earning and bringing money home, providing for dependents and making wise use of the money—as in house-building—have become core preoccupations for men across all communities” (Osella & Osella, 2006).

Heteronormativity assumes that “gender is natally ascribed, natural, and immutable” (Cooper 2002, p.46) and the most normal/essential aspect of human existence. As a powerful principle which is “painfully constructed” (Menon, 2012, p. 110), it dictates and controls how men and women need to be together, placing them within the male-female binary gender system (Shapiro, 1991; Cooper, 2002). The fixity of this dualistic gender system was brought into question in the 1990s with Butler’s concept of performativity. Gender performativity, an accepted paradigm in the field of gender studies, suggests that one’s gender identity is performatively constituted and reproduced by the “very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p.33). For instance, one becomes a man through repeatedly performing what has traditionally been known as “masculine” acts, and “one can, if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man” (p. 144). Butler’s theory has found resonance in specific cultural contexts as well, such as Osella and Osella’s ethnographic work on South Asian men. They note that, to be a man, being initiated into manhood through rituals is not enough, and that “successful and repeated performances of dominant masculinity are needed” (2006, p. 203). However, they also caution that hegemonic masculinity may be performed differently across richly plural societies.

## Masculinity in popular culture

The shift in the thinking that masculinity and femininity are permanent traits inbuilt in men and women respectively, brought about by the feminist movement, reverberated across academic disciplines that studied gender from historical, sociological, anthropological and cultural perspectives. It was more or less agreed that these attributes were culturally and historically conditioned, and that plural societies had different versions of masculinity from dominant cultures in the West. In the case of South Asia, some of the extensive literature on masculinities politicise the concept by relating it to colonialism, while some scholars, such as Banerjee (2012) and Chakraborty (2011), connect the “gendered histories of colonialism and nationalism to aggressive, violent, upper-caste masculinities of the Hindu right today” (Gopinath &

Sundar, 2020, p.1). Other literature includes a few edited anthologies of performative masculinities in contemporary South Asia (see Gopinath & Sundar, 2020). Across cultural contexts, while it was observed that occupying public spaces, working, earning and spending count as intensely masculine activities (Jackson, 2000; De Neve, 2004; Osella & Osella, 2006), scholars acknowledge that masculinity is a plural concept, structured by varied power struggles and hierarchies.

It goes without saying that amid such constant contestations and negotiations, certain forms of masculinity are bound to be celebrated, while some others are marginalised. This is evident in cultural texts such as mass media, literature and film. Ethnographic and cultural studies from the region note that “a highly-charged combination of aggression and erotics appears time and again as both the flavour of a male stance towards the female and as a necessary combination which gives birth to true masculinity” (Chopra et al., 2004, p. 27). Studying masculinity in the social context of Indian films, Osella and Osella (2006) invoke Derne’s (2000) work to assert that one needs to talk about male dominance, violence and subjugation while dealing with gender and masculinities. Agreeing with Derne’s stance, they argue that men actively utilise popular culture to advance male dominance. In his review of the same, Alter (2001) further notes that these films propagate a new “Indianness” (set against the West and Westernisation), reflect and reinforce male dominance and “celebrate aggressive sexuality and violence wherein men have power and women do not” (p. 1208).

## Masculinity and news media

There is considerable research from primarily Western contexts that addresses the question of how news media frame events to generate a particular representation of masculinity (see Consalvo, 2003; Trimble et. al, 2015; Nilsson & Lundgren, 2020); however, less attention appears to have been paid to the masculinist performance of journalists themselves. Apart from popular commentary and a fair amount of discussion within professional forums of women journalists, there is a dearth of scholarship that looks at masculinities from either perspective in the Indian media context. Western scholars have raised the question of how journalists legitimise certain performances of masculinity as normal (see Cooper, 2002; Vavrus, 2002; Coe et. al, 2008). Studying the specific case of political

news coverage of then US President George W. Bush’s public communications prior to and following the September 11 attacks, Coe et. al (2008) found that Bush’s strategic employment of masculinist traits—strength and dominance—was co-opted by the press in their coverage, and news discourse surrounding the event was highly masculinist, echoing the stylistic elements of the President’s discourse, such as word choice and structure. The authors discussed the implications of this adoption of masculinised language by the news media as it relates to the state of gender, politics and democracy in the United States, arguing that “gender-coded discourse works almost invisibly and with minimal political risk” and “functions as a powerful subtext that is clearly present but not manifestly so,” making it difficult to address (p. 50).

This invisibility of gendering contributes to the myth of gender-neutral journalistic performance. Ojajärvi (2001), speaking of Finnish television, remarked that “When it comes to the news, a certain gender neutrality is assumed by the journalistic culture,” (p. 210) which both emerges from and feeds into the broader myth of gender equality. Ojajärvi further argued that news in itself is a masculine genre that represents the values traditionally considered masculine. On the “gender logic” of journalistic work, Djerf-Pierre wrote:

*Despite the advances made by women in journalism through the 1900s, journalism as a field has remained male-dominated. What does this imply? ... [M]asculinity (in its historically specific forms) and power (the bases of which have varied over time) are closely related to the ideas about what constitutes good journalism that have prevailed in different periods (2007, p. 99).*

This forces a woman working in the media to play secondary roles “unless she is willing to [conform] to masculine norms” (Ojajärvi, 2001) and become “one of the boys” (Melin, 2008). As Sedgwick puts it, “When something is about masculinity, it isn’t always about men” (1995, p. 12).

Scholarship on gender in Indian media—as representation and inclusion—has related mostly to news coverage, on the one hand, and the presence of women and minorities in the newsroom and decision-making roles in the media (Joseph & Sharma, 2006; Joseph, 2005, 2014; Sharma, 2010). While the relative lack of visibility of women and other genders in news and newsmaking is certainly a feature of patriarchal norms both in media and in society, it also creates the space for hegemonic masculinity to flourish.





In March 2019, a cartoon of the TIME magazine depicting PM Modi in the manner seen went viral. It was in fact an altered version of American political cartoonist David Horsey's cartoon for the Los Angeles Times on 14 May 2012 titled, 'Republican Party Suckles at the Breast of Big Business'.

These various strands of scholarship on gender roles and masculinities suggest that the social norms that shape everyday expectations of what is ideally (and prescriptively) male can become toxic and oppressive, affecting men, women and trans persons in a vicious cycle of learned and imposed behaviours. These seep into performance in professional, public and private spaces, solidifying associations with what we may consider positive traits such as courage, assertiveness, resoluteness and even integrity, such that it becomes difficult to identify the source of oppression and toxicity. There have been attempts by artists to point to how these dangerous discourses have been normalised; for instance, Anand Patwardhan's *Reason*, or *Jai Bhim Comrade*, among many others, offer commentaries on the insidious ways in which a certain ideology becomes part of the everyday. The current social and political context in India, suffused as it is by majoritarian ideas around class, caste, ethnicity and religion (in addition to gender), makes it particularly important to understand masculinist performance in the media in order to possibly begin to dismantle it in favour of a more empathetic and dialogic form of journalistic presentation.



### 3. Methodology

Social and cultural norms may be discerned in many aspects of life, from the personal and familial to the professional and public spheres. Gender norms are no different, finding expression in our words, actions and interactions, normalising and even privileging ways of behaving that are distinctly gendered—emphasising and endorsing, through repetition, the “right way” to be a man, and by extension associating such “positively” perceived qualities as authority, professionalism, and expertise with masculinity. Media, particularly television news, and now social media, become an important site for the performance and normalisation of masculinity, and the reinforcement of hegemonic gender norms.

The monitoring exercise sought to understand the ways in which certain attributes (such as valour, strength, honour and courage) are naturalised through journalistic and popular discourse as essentially male, or as the exclusive domain of men. We also sought to understand how masculinity was linked with certain kinds of performance (assertiveness, aggression, arrogance, power, physical dominance, verbal and physical violence, hypermasculine body and behaviour), as well as the denigration of other genders and attributes traditionally associated with them.

Arriving at an approach to identify and document the performance of masculinity, in particular hegemonic or toxic masculinity, was a challenge, given that no validated tools are available that can be readily applied in the context of Indian media. Under the circumstances we were faced with the task of developing a monitoring framework that would enable the easy identification and documentation of discrete behaviours that are normatively associated with aggressive and dominant forms of masculinity and contribute to hegemonic and toxic gender performativity. The endeavour was further complicated by the fact that the objective was to study *journalistic performance*, and *journalistic discourse*, rather than content or bias in news presentation, which might be achieved through more conventional or even critical content analysis. The questions of interest to the project were:

1. How is masculinity expressed/presented in journalistic discourse in television news and talk shows?
2. How is masculinity expressed in popular discourse, particularly on social media platforms?
3. How can toxic or hegemonic masculinity be resisted in journalistic performance?

In addition, we were interested in identifying the



markers that might be emblematic of a preferred masculine performance, in terms of vocabulary used, tone of presentation and context of reference. As a corollary, we wished to understand what, if any, modes of resistance to these masculinist norms might exist within mainstream journalistic practice, particularly in broadcast media.

The study took a three-pronged approach to seeking answers to these questions. The first part of the project involved a week-long television news monitoring exercise, using a tool that was specifically developed for the purpose. This was followed by an analysis of selected social media content, focusing on viral posts around themes of current interest. The third component was a set of case studies that allowed a more in-depth analysis of gendered journalistic performance, with a focus on hegemonic/toxic masculinity. Using these three

separate approaches we hoped to arrive at a fuller understanding of how masculinist performativity played out in journalistic discourse and journalistic presentation.

For the purposes of our analysis, toxic and hegemonic masculinity was indicated by the presence of three observable dimensions:

- Aggression and anger (expressed physically, verbally or in affect)
- Dominance (over others in verbal or non-verbal behaviour — e.g. confrontation versus dialogue, competition versus collaboration/cooperation)
- Sexism (patronising, dismissive or aggressive behaviours towards women and attitudes to femininity, including but not limited to obvious misogyny, trans and queer-phobia)

Given that there was no readily applicable tool that we could use to catalogue journalistic performance in this context, we developed an inventory of observable

behaviours associated with each of these dimensions, each marked on a four-point scale of “absent” to “highly present”. The tool was pilot tested and refined over two weeks prior to its use in the exercise. (The survey tool can be accessed on the NWMI website [here](#))

In addition, the format included two composite variables designed to measure the presence of gender-positive behaviours and overall hegemonic masculinity, again marked on a four-point scale from absent to highly present. Coders were also asked to add any qualitative observations not covered by the objective items in an open-ended question at the end of the form.

An open call to participate in the study, put out on the NWMI email group, received 27 responses from network members who represented a diversity of linguistic capabilities. The group was familiarised with the tool through an online training session, with a follow up session scheduled after the pilot study and subsequent feedback. Response formats were also developed for the social media analysis and case studies for ease of documentation.



Corporate advertising in the form of social media memes reinforce gender stereotypes about driving and vehicle maintenance.

## Channels Monitored

Channel	Language	Channel	Language
ABP Ananda	Bangla	News 18	Tamil
ABP Asmita	Gujarati	Odisha TV	Odia
ABP Majha	Marathi	Pratidin Time	Assamese
ABP News	Hindi	Public TV	Kannada
Asianet	Kannada	PTC	Punjabi
Asianet	Malayalam	Polimer News	Tamil
CNN-News 18	English	Republic	English
DD India	English	Saam TV	Marathi
DD Malayalam	Malayalam	Times Now	English
DY365	Assamese	TV 9	Gujarati
Kanak TV	Odia	TV 9	Bangla
Mathrubhumi	Malayalam	V6 News	Telugu
ND 24x7	Assamese	WION	English
NDTV Hindi	Hindi	Zee 24 Ghanta	Bangla
News 18 Bangla	Bangla	Zee Hindustan	Hindi
News 18 Gujarati	Gujarati		

Volunteers monitored prime time news in their assigned language for one week, from 19 to 25 September 2021 (seven days), as well as two editions of a talk show during the same period. Observations were entered into a data collection format that made use of Google Forms. This allowed us to easily collate the data and later analyse it within the functionality of Google Forms. Three additional cases of journalistic performativity were qualitatively analysed, which included one popular anchor on a Hindi channel, a news show in a small town, and coverage of a single issue by a cluster of television channels over a short period. In addition, a small number of social media posts were selected for analysis relating to the second question of interest mentioned above (How is masculinity expressed in popular discourse, particularly on social media platforms?); these involved matters of public or critical interest that had been widely discussed over the year leading up to 30 September 2021 on the assumption that the exercise would offer a window into the gendered nature of public discourse.

Volunteers used their discretion to select cases for analysis, focusing in particular on those with potential for a gender-based analysis. A total of six social media cases and the related conversation clusters were analysed. What follows is largely a descriptive presentation of the findings. A more complex statistical analysis was not possible given that the form was not validated using accepted tools of quantitative analysis. However, even these data serve to paint a picture – in broad brush strokes – of the kind of journalistic performance that reinforces and normalises masculinist discourse in ways that become “natural” and accepted, and thereby insidiously become the norm in both public and private realms.

The findings of this study were presented to and discussed with a small group of journalists from electronic, print and digital media, scholars, activists, and media commentators at a closed-door consultation held in New Delhi on 3 and 4 December 2021. Recommendations were finalised on the basis of inputs during and after the discussions.

## 4. Findings: Journalistic performance and masculinist discourse

### Key Findings

The analysis is based on monitoring 185 news and talk shows across 31 television channels in 12 languages between 19 and 25 September 2021, case studies of specific incidents/coverage and analysis of social media discourse.



- Journalism was performed differently in news bulletins and on talk shows: while news was generally presented in a relatively straightforward manner, with little or no observable affect, in discussion panels and talk shows, anchors, hosts and guests engaged in performance that could be read as aggressively masculine.
- While aggression was observed in over half of all the news shows sampled, the number rose to 85% for talk shows.
- The format of talk shows—typically featuring multiple guests/panel members—evidently enabled anchors to behave in more traditionally masculinist ways.
- Sound, graphics, studio backdrops and other effects often added an aggressive/strident tone to both news and talk shows.
- Tone of voice was found to be the most common expression of aggression (76.76%), while supporting elements such as sound and visual effects signifying aggression occurred frequently, too (60%).
- Marginally more male anchors (78.13%) employed an aggressive tone of voice than female anchors (75.28%).
- Approximately half the male anchors (50.33%) were found to demean or undermine guests/sources, whereas less than a third of female anchors (30.34%) did so.
- Visibly gender-positive behaviours were observed in just 23.38% of the shows analysed. Female anchors used gender-sensitive language more often than male anchors (female: 41.57%, male: 35.42%).
- Panels moderated by male anchors revealed relatively more aggressive masculinist behaviour on several metrics than those moderated by female anchors. In the former, members of panels challenged each other more frequently (54.55%) than in the latter (12.07%). More shouting by speakers over one another was also observed in male-moderated panels (48.75%) as compared to female-moderated panels (15.52%).
- Dismissive language which diminished or overrode other speakers was found to be the most common indicator of overt sexism (24.16%).
- Few female or non-binary persons were featured as guests on panels, even during discussions on issues with an obvious gender dimension.
- Toxic masculinity combined with right-wing, hyper-nationalist, majoritarian ideology was evident in discourse on social media. Anyone critical of the ruling establishment was branded “anti-national” and subjected to verbal assault by online trolls. Online violence sometimes included increasingly real threats of offline violence.
- Audience research is required to test the veracity of the common argument put forward by media decision-makers to justify the shouting matches that now pass for news television: that aggressive performativity begets greater viewership.



## A. Media monitoring

The study aimed to measure the performance of masculinity in journalistic discourse by monitoring news and talk shows in the languages represented by coders. We defined “journalists” as including anchors and reporters in electronic media. Based on the literature and adapting from earlier studies, three attributes that contribute to hegemonic or toxic masculinity were studied:

1) Aggression/Anger, 2) Dominance, and 3) Sexism.

These three attributes were further described in terms of specific behaviours—use of language, tone, and gestures—that were indicative of the presence or absence of these traits. In addition, we looked at the incidence of gender-positive behaviours exhibited by the journalists in the content studied, and the overall presence of hegemonic masculinity. Coders also noted the presence of additional disembodied content, such as headlines, tickers, studio sets and audio effects, that conveyed these three attributes of masculinity.

The channels were selected to include a range of languages. Overall, 31 channels in 12 languages were monitored over a period of one week (19-25 September); the sample included a total (N) of 185 individual shows amounting to close to 200 hours of programming. Each entry represented a single episode of a news bulletin or talk show. A few entries represented episodes outside the main study period, but they were also included in the analysis. The sample characteristics are summarised below:

- The biggest chunk of content analysed, as signified by the number of entries (36, or 19%), was from English programming. Bangla (26), Hindi (19), Gujarati (18), Malayalam (15) and Assamese (15) came next, together accounting for 69.72% of the total (129 entries). Other languages (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Punjabi) made up the remaining 30.28%, with Punjabi (2%) accounting for the smallest number.
- News bulletins/programmes formed 56% of the sample and talk shows 34%. Other genres (satire, magazine, special programmes) made up 10%.
- Most of the news programmes/bulletins (40.8%) ranged in duration from 15 to 30 minutes.
- Gender of the host was almost equally distributed (52% male and 48% female), with no non-binary anchors/hosts.



Coders recorded the presence of the specific behaviours associated with the variables of interest that were exhibited by the anchor or the host along a four-point scale ranging from absent to highly present (see Annexure 1). We used a Likert-type scale (used to record responses on a scale, usually from absent to degrees of presence, of the attribute that is being measured), with a response range of four points (highly present, somewhat present, minimally present, and absent). After a trial run, the coding team noted that there was a marked difference in the way journalism was performed on news bulletins and on talk shows. News appeared to be presented in a straightforward manner with little or no observable affect, although other audio-visual and graphic elements occasionally added an emotional tone. It was on discussion panels and talk shows that anchors, hosts and guests exhibited an affective performance that aimed at communicating confidence, competence or even professionalism in ways that could be read as aggressively masculine. However, the nature of straightforward news bulletins itself seems to have changed over time, with most channels at prime time presenting a combination of shorter news segments and ‘packages’ of talk shows on the topic of the day.

We detail below the results from the monitoring exercise along the five variables studied.

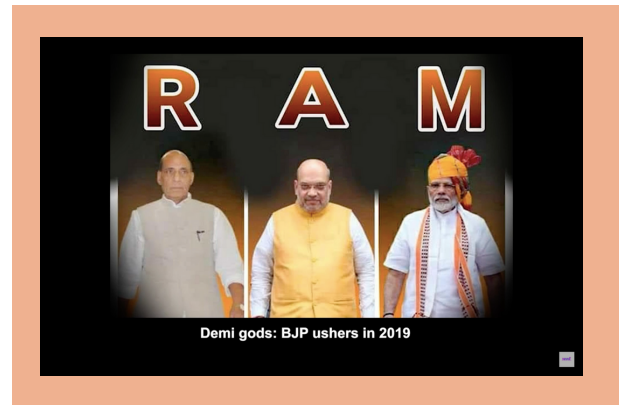


## 1. Aggression and anger

Coders were asked to subjectively mark their impressions of aggression (highly present, somewhat present, minimally present and absent) as expressed through seven aspects: body language, words, tone of voice, use of visuals and graphic elements, sound effects, and interpersonal dynamics. The variable was operationalised in the following way: aggression refers to observable expressions (including verbal, physical, and emotional cues) of physical/emotional harm, or threats of physical violence, against the other, while anger refers to observable feelings of fury, rage and hostility. Coders were given the following examples:

- Verbal aggression may include a threat issued through words indicating harm/violence or through a loud/aggressive tone;
- Aggressive affect may include facial cues—red face, tense mouth or jaw, furrowed brow, grimacing, frowning or scowling, no eye contact or extreme eye contact, stoic expression.
- Physical cues may include violent or overbearing hand gestures, tense body language, instances of banging on the table, standing up, pointing fingers, etc.

Combining the scores for ‘highly present’, ‘somewhat present’, and ‘minimally present’, we found that such aggressive behaviours occurred 63% to 76% of the time across the 185 episodes analysed (Figure 1; the percentages here represent the share of combined indicators of ‘present’ out of total entries for Male/Female). Tone of voice was found to be the most common expression of aggression (76.76%), while

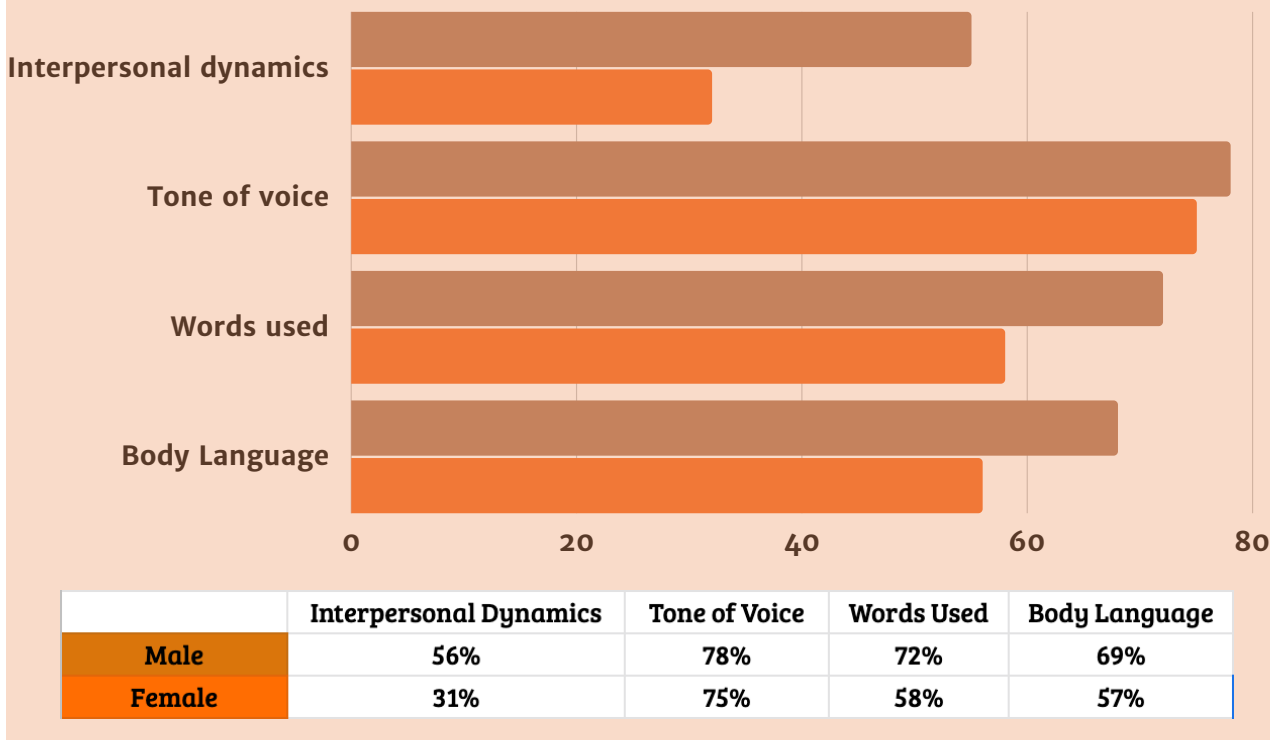


supporting elements such as sound and visual effects signifying aggression occurred 64.86% and 59.46% of the time. In addition, coders noted the presence of aggressively worded hashtags such as #StopHinduphobia, terms such as “Gaddar” (traitor) for people from minority communities or political opponents, and/or descriptions such as “behaved like a man” to connote approval of a news subject.

Overall, female anchors in the sample displayed signs of aggression and anger less often than the male anchors. However, this difference varied across indicators. Aggressive interpersonal dynamics (understood in the form of interruptions, derision, etc.) had the widest gender gap—female anchors displayed such behaviours 31.46% of the time, compared to 56.25% for male anchors. A substantial difference was also found in aggressive word usage (58.43% for female and 71.88% for male anchors). Notably, both female (75.28%) and male (78.13%) anchors were found to employ an aggressive tone of voice in a comparably high proportion of instances.



## Presence of aggressive behaviour (by gender)



## 2. Dominance

Journalists can use their voices, words, gestures and body language in a manner that asserts dominance over other participants in an interaction. Specifically, dominance refers to expressions of superiority over others, assertion of power/control over others or attempts to gain the upper-hand in a particular context; it may be expressed verbally or non-verbally (through words, body language, sound, tone, visuals/graphics). Conventional gender norms suggest that professionalism, particularly in public-facing occupations such as journalism, is often associated with masculine characteristics which, when deployed repeatedly in interactions, establish dominance over other participants.

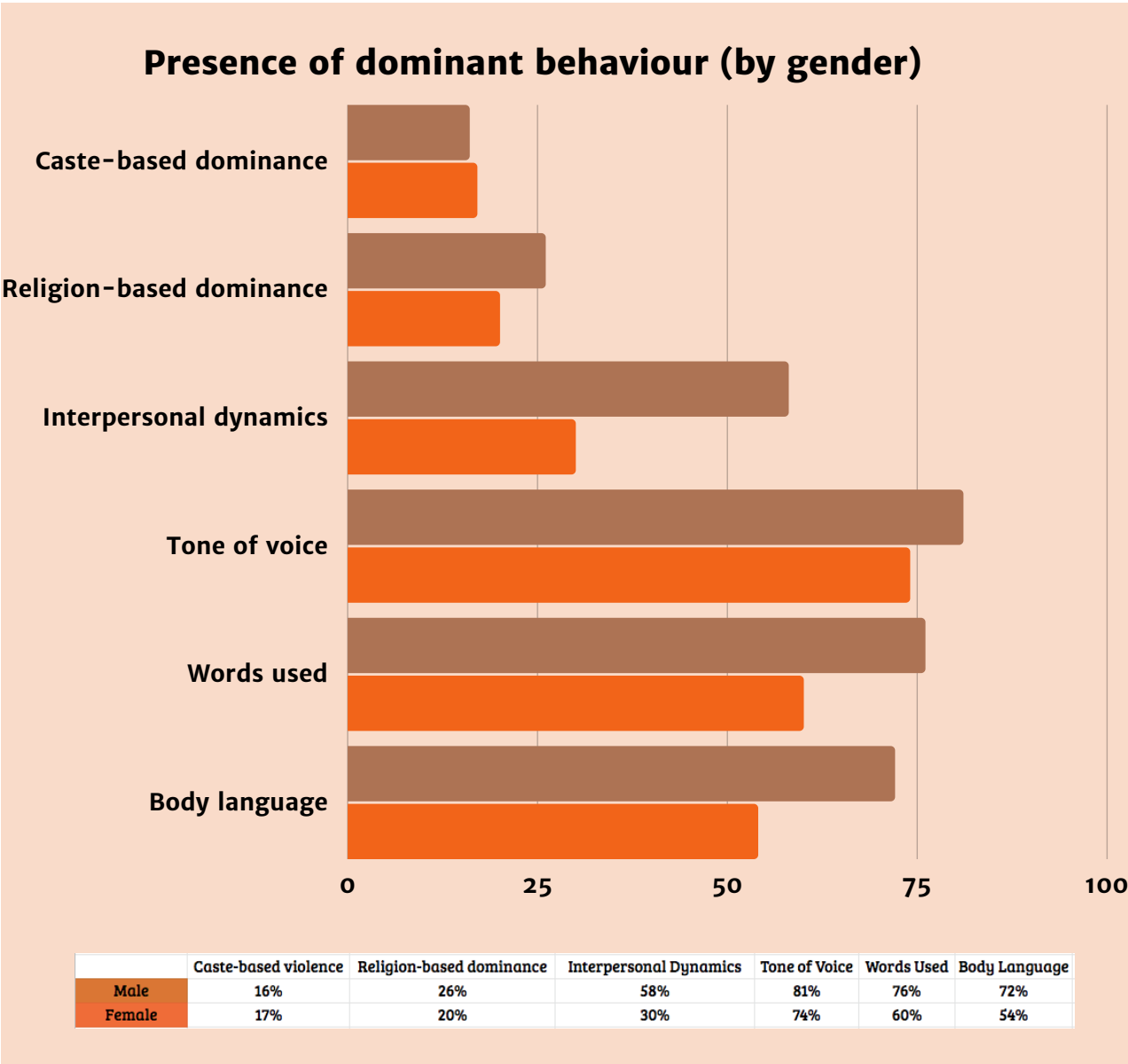
Coders were given examples of observable behaviours to note, including the following:

- confrontation over dialogue (frequent interruptions, for example)
- competition rather than collaboration/cooperation
- denial of agency to women/queer persons
- exhibition of control/ownership over female/queer bodies
- assertion as custodians of a certain “culture”
- interpersonal dynamics that disparage/diminish invited guests/sources
- evidence of identity-based prejudices leading to discrimination based on caste, tribe, religion and/or other identities



As in the previous variable, for ease of analysis, the response categories of ‘highly present’, ‘somewhat present’ and ‘minimally present’ were combined into a single category of “present” for the sub-categories of ‘dominance’ (body language, words, tone of voice). Dominant behaviours were present in journalistic performance in about 66% of the total number of cases, irrespective of the gender of the host. Tone of voice was the feature that was most often used to assert dominance (77.84%), followed by words (68.12%) and body language (63.24%).

Both male and female anchors were found to use a domineering tone of voice in their delivery in a large number of instances (male: 81.25%, female: 74.16%). The biggest recorded disparity between male and female performances of dominance was with respect to interpersonal dynamics: male anchors were found to demean or otherwise undermine their guests/sources in 58.33% of the observed instances, whereas the same behaviour was observed in female anchors 30.34% of the time.



### 3. Sexism

Overt sexism (as indicated in language, verbal and affective responses to others, and use of visuals/graphics), was further elaborated for the study as including:

- patronising, dismissive or aggressive behaviours towards women and femininity

- presence of obvious misogyny and queer-phobia
- objectification/commodification of women
- distrust/hatred/ignorance of non-heteronormative persons

For this variable, too, the three points on the four-point scale of 'minimally present', 'somewhat present' and 'highly present' were combined into one category: 'present'. Coders found relatively few instances of overt sexism across the news and talk shows analysed. Dismissive language was the most common indicator of overt sexism found (24.16%), followed by degrading language (15.73%) and sexist visuals (12.99%). Dismissive language was understood as language that minimised or overrode the speaker, while degrading language referred to the use of pejorative or negative terms while addressing the speaker or referring to their speech.

There was no notable difference between male and female hosts/anchors with respect to sexist behaviours. However, the use of dismissive language towards women or other genders was found to be slightly higher in the case of male anchors than their female counterparts (27.66% and 19.54% respectively).

However, several coders noted the relative absence of female or non-binary persons as guests on panels, even during discussions on issues with a gender dimension.

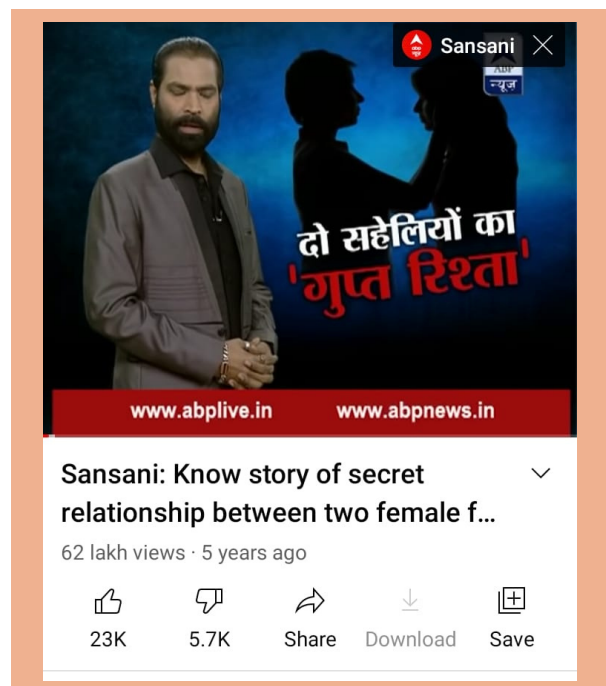
#### 4. Positive Behaviour

The fourth variable of interest was the presence of gender-positive behaviours or attributes that may be seen as asserting confidence and competence in a positive manner, through the display of empathetic and engaged listening, turn-taking in dialogue and restrained body language. By and large, coders did not find many instances of such behaviours: across the 185 cases, there were fewer than 71 occurrences (38.37%) of the use of gender-sensitive language, 52 occurrences (28.1%) of hosts offering vocal support to women and sexual minorities, and just 38 occurrences (20.54%) of hosts opposing sexist or misogynistic behaviour. Combining the categories of highly present, somewhat present and minimally present, visibly gender-positive behaviours were observed in just 23.38% of the shows analysed.

Female anchors were found to use gender sensitive language towards women and other genders in a marginally higher proportion than male anchors (male: 35.42%, female: 41.57%).

#### 5. Hegemonic Masculinity: Overall Impressions

The composite notion of "Hegemonic Masculinity" was constructed using the presence of the following



behaviours in panel members, including but not limited to the host/anchor, as indicators:

- shouting over panel members
- frequent interruptions of panellists
- frequent challenges to panellists (understood as disputing or confronting)
- differential/gendered treatment of (or by) panellists
- use of rude language

Although this variable was studied only in relation to panel discussions or talk shows, it was difficult to discern these behaviours consistently across the sample. Despite combining all three levels of occurrence (highly present, somewhat present, and minimally present), such behaviours were noted in a little over 30% of the cases. The most common behaviour seen (at any level) was "frequent interruptions" (58), followed by use of rude language (50). The seven attributes of hegemonic masculinity were marked as "highly present" 76 times (10.5%) by coders across the episodes analysed.

Panels moderated by male anchors displayed relatively higher instances of hegemonic masculinist behaviour on several metrics. The most striking finding was the frequency of challenges to each other by members of panels moderated by male anchors (54.55%); such behaviour was observed in only 12.07% of panels moderated by female anchors. More shouting over one another was also observed in male-moderated panels (48.75%) as opposed to those moderated by women (15.52%). Neither male nor female anchors appeared to treat female panellists differently from male panellists.

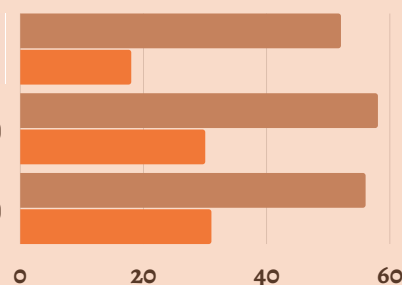


## Interpersonal dynamics between hosts and panellists

Hegemonic masculinity by panellists (shouting, challenging, interrupting)

Dominance by anchor (confrontation, demeaning etc.)

Aggression by anchor (interruptions, derision, etc)



	Hegemonic masculinity by panelists (shouting, challenging, interrupting)	Dominance by anchor (confrontation, demeaning, etc.)	Aggression by anchor (interruptions, derision, etc.)
Male Anchor	52%	58%	56%
Female Anchor	18%	30%	31%

### Performing hegemonic masculinity

Coders pointed out specific behaviours that came across as indicative of hegemonic masculinity while sharing their overall qualitative impressions of the selected programming. For example, in shows co-hosted by male and female anchors, the gender dynamics often revealed subtle (and not so subtle) sexism in the treatment of the subject, the colleague and sources, as well as in the interaction. Below is a selection of observations made by the coders in this regard:

The male anchor dominates the female host. The female host's body language is like that of an obedient student. She is reduced to playing the second fiddle. She was saying just 'yes' to all comments the male host was making on the news of the day. ... The female host was not given the slightest opportunity to make her own comments on the news. She is in the programme to just read the news and open the floor for the male host to give his comments.

(Big Bulletin, Republic TV, 20/9/21)

Two separate incidents of rape were highlighted in today's programme. The debate that took place in the state legislature about the Mysore rape incident and the women MLAs voicing their concern was the focus. The male anchor showed restraint while presenting these developments. However, the graphics used as usual were stereotypical.... The woman anchor as usual plays second fiddle. Many times she is not allowed to complete her sentences and the male anchor takes over. He is the dominant voice in the programme. A report on a Delhi restaurant not allowing women who wore sarees was also

featured in this bulletin. Commenting on this, the male anchor asked angrily, "How can they not allow women wearing sarees. Had their great grandmother worn chaddi (shorts)?" Here, the language and tone displayed outright verbal sexism.

(Public TV, Kannada, 23/9/21)

The tendency to frequently interrupt or talk over other panellists or co-hosts is not limited to male hosts, as noted here:

A female anchor led the news bulletin, but some of her actions fit into our definitions of masculinity. The host is seen interrupting some news bytes and on-field reports. Some terms used while addressing the COVID situation in the state were mildly aggressive.

(Doordarshan Malayalam Evening News, 19/9/21)

Aggressive language and gestures were accentuated by the use of dramatic sound effects and music:

The female anchor sounded quite rude. Even while presenting the story of [a] rape case her tone was on high pitch. Throughout the news presentation she was talking loudly, waving her hands. The background music was like that in suspense/horror movie.

(News18 Gujarati, 20/9/21)

In other cases, the aggressive behaviour came from panellists, sometimes directed at the female host:

...the host was calm and cool and she tried to hear [out] the participants, but some of the participants showed their masculinity by using phrases like: "you may not be aware of the recent data" to a female participant, though she is well



equipped with data and statistics in that particular matter.  
(NDTV 24X7, *Cover Story*, 18/9/21)

There is a routinised, understated performance of masculinity in this example from Bengali television:

The anchor does not raise his voice rather he tries to showcase the Bengali witty 'Bhadralok' image which in a way is imposingly masculine. He encourages a catfight among the panellists and then tries to intervene with a superior manner.  
(ABP Ananda, 19/9/21)

More often than not, aggression and dominance were quite visible, as noted in this comment about an all-male panel on a Malayalam channel:

The panel was anchored by a male and had four male panellists. The anchor is seen challenging the panellists and exerting dominance through his body language and tone. He also pointed his fingers at the panellists, and his body language was aggressive sometimes. It was also observed that the anchor sometimes tried to exert dominance over the panellist's viewpoints by paraphrasing their comments and interpreting different conclusions. I felt that the anchor was doing this to spice up the discussion, but it is not really ethical. The members of the panel were talking over each other and also throwing challenges at each other.  
(Doordarshan Malayalam News, 28/9/21)

Crime stories are a major site for the performance of masculinity on television, with visuals, sound and voiceover constructing the narrative.

A female anchor presented a case of a husband murdering his wife because he suspected her of having extra marital affairs. The gory scene of the wife's body lying in a pool of blood was shown several times, accompanied by dramatic music. The anchor reports that the accused stated before the police that he got the idea of murdering his wife from a Kannada film '*Baa Nalle Madhumanchake*' ("Come, darling, to the honeymoon bed"). The song sequences of the film, objectifying women, were also aired several times during the narration of the crime. Far from questioning the power structure behind violent crimes against women, the show trivialised and sensationalised it, reinforcing the status quo in a crude manner. Watching this show was not easy!  
(Asianet Suvarna News Kannada)

Several coders noted the relative absence of women on talk show panels, even when the subject of discussion was ostensibly a "women's issue".

Sometimes, within the same episode, such behaviours were accompanied by respectful language when speaking of women political leaders— with misogynistic or masculinist behaviour peppering a show intermittently, even insidiously.

A more subtle form of promoting masculinist performance was by valourising the "brave and intrepid reporter", even if a high price has to be paid for chasing a story.

The bulletin was mostly dedicated to the death of Arindam Das, senior reporter of OTV who died during an elephant rescue operation in Mahanadi River. Footage of his reporting with the channel was aired and his heroic actions during cyclonic storms and floods were showcased. His unfortunate death must be seen in the context of unhealthy competition between regional channels. The channel repeatedly projected him as a daredevil reporter, displaying a strong masculine mindset of channel heads who control their reporters and hosts, forcing them to project their masculinity on screen.  
(Odisha Television (OTV))

It was also noted that even public/state broadcasters often promote hegemonic masculinity, albeit in barely discernible ways.

Doordarshan news has overall sober coverage but tilts strongly pro-establishment/government and promotes the PM, a very masculine leader—all his gestures, appearance, demeanour are spotlighted as though on a stage performance. The channel is dedicated to promoting a personality cult and does a marvellous job of it. The visuals, the presentation and music all go towards building Brand Modi, an epitome of masculinity. The special broadcast on the PM's visit to the US (Sept 21-25) was an exercise the public broadcaster used to further the mission of promoting the government – and more than that, one man. A cult, so to speak. The entire programme was designed to promote Modi's personality cult—visuals larger than life, his image deliberately projected: strong and commanding leader of an emerging world power, etc. The intensity of focus on DD is of course completely in contrast to the coverage of the event in international media (as assessed by surfing channels on these days).  
(NewsNight on Doordarshan)

**Table. Presence of variables associated with hegemonic masculinity across the 185 episodes of news and talk show programming analysed**

Name of variable	Number of times marked "highly present" in the content analysed	Total impressions recorded (highly present + somewhat present + minimally present)	Total scale entries (highly present + somewhat present + minimally present + absent)
<b>Aggression</b> (7 attributes)	182 (14%)	721 (55.6%)	1295
<b>Dominance</b> (9 attributes)	218 (13%)	781 (47%)	1665
<b>Sexism</b> (4 attributes)	31 (4.2%)	108 (14.6%)	740
<b>Positive Behaviours</b> (4 attributes)	35 (4.7%)	173 (23.4%)	740
<b>Hegemonic Masculinity</b> (7 attributes)	78 (10.5%)	254 (34.3%)	740

## Differences across languages

Some differences in the presence of the variables of interest were noticed across different language media. This reflects the different ways in which masculinist cultures pervade various regions and across linguistic groups.

**English media** constituted 19% of the sample (N) and English was at the top of the list of languages in terms of the number of TV channels monitored for this study. The variable of '**Aggression**' was found to be 'highly present' in English media, flagged the most number of times and constituting 24.72% of the total noted occurrences of this dimension. Media in **Gujarati**, the third most monitored language despite making up only 10% of (N), came next at 15.93%.

For the variable of '**Dominance**', **Hindi** took the lead, with 'highly present' making up 34.86% of the total number of occurrences of this variable, followed by English at 22.93%. It is to be noted that Hindi media constituted 10% of the sample. **Bengali**, the second most monitored language (14%), appeared to have fewer elements of dominance, with its share of 'highly present' placed at 6.4%.

Tamil programming constituted only 5% of (N) but it had the maximum share of 'highly present' for the variable of '**Sexism**' – 38.70%.

For the variable of Positive Behaviour, the 'highly present' element was visible in only three languages: Bengali (74.28%), English (22.85%) and Tamil (2.85%). In all the other nine languages included in the study, positive behaviour elements were found to be either 'somewhat



Memes of popular NDTV India anchor Ravish Kumar, mocking him as 'feminine' for talking peace, are widely circulated on WhatsApp

present', 'minimally present' or 'absent'. In fact, positive behaviour was marked 'absent' in 76.62% of all occurrences of this variable.

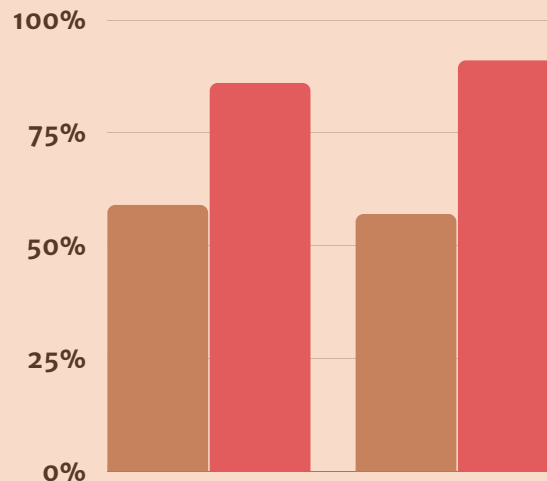
For '**Hegemonic Masculinity**', **English** had the maximum share of 'highly present', at 30.76% of all occurrences of this variable. English, Hindi, Gujarati and Bengali together accounted for 80.76% of the share of 'highly present' with regard to this variable. Of the remaining 20% or less, Assamese and Tamil accounted for 16.66%.

## Differences across formats

For the metrics of aggression and dominance, there were substantial differences in the incidence of masculinist behaviour between news shows and talk shows. Aggression in the form of body language, word usage and tone of voice was observed in 58.81% of all news shows sampled. However, the number stood at 85.94% for talk shows. Similarly, dominant behaviour—measured in terms of body language, word usage

and tone of voice—was observed in 56.92% of all news shows studied, but was evident in 91.15% of the talk shows studied. This suggests that the format of talk shows—often featuring multiple guests/panel members—enables anchors to behave in more traditionally masculinist ways. No significant differences were observed for the metrics of sexism and positive behaviours.

**Difference across format-incidence of aggression and dominance**



	Aggression	Dominance
News Show	59%	57%
Talk Show	86%	91%



The Assembly elections in March-April 2021 witnessed intense polarisation along communal lines. The BJP with its Hindutva agenda targeted sitting Chief Minister and leader of the Trinamool Congress party, Mamata Bannerjee, in widely circulated sexist and Islamophobic memes such as 'Jihadi Didi'



## B. Case Studies: Stereotypes and Beyond

In addition to the monitoring of news and talk shows, a set of three cases were studied, one each focusing on a popular journalist, a rural news channel, and coverage of a single ongoing story. The first looked at television talk show host Anjana Om Kashyap, whose popularity can largely be attributed to her aggressive screen presence. The second looked at Mithila Mirror, a Maithili language news channel that appears to favour women anchors and reporters, rejecting in many ways the stereotypical aggression that otherwise pervades much of Indian television news. The third looks at coverage of a single event (the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan) across several television channels, attempting to understand how conflict as a news value allows for aggressive handling on screen. The purpose of these case studies was to understand journalistic performance more qualitatively, noting nuances in professional norms that may reflect pervasive masculinist standards.



Screengrabs with strident text and tickers

## Anjana Om Kashyap: On the War Path

Anjana Om Kashyap is an anchor of the popular Hindi talk show 'Halla Bol' ( 'Attack!') on the Aaj Tak news channel, which speaks to a large Hindi-speaking demographic in the country. Her journalistic performance was studied by analysing seven episodes of her talk show, which aired between August and October 2021.

Here's what we found: Kashyap displayed several signs of aggression during her reportage as well as her interaction with panellists. Her tense body language and raised tone of voice appeared to be triggered by the topic of the talk show and the identity and/or political stances of the panellists. For instance, in several episodes that were centred around the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan, she adopted a hostile stance towards panellists who were framed as representing pro-Pakistan views. For example, in the episode dealing with the political developments in Afghanistan (15 August 2021), Kashyap was seen berating Qamar Cheema, a political analyst from Pakistan, for what she contextualised as his pro-Pakistan, pro-terrorism views. "Who is going to praise your wisdom, Sir? Anyone who has any wisdom will certainly not shower you with any praise," she commented antagonistically, using ad hominem arguments.

A pattern of deviations—rhetorical disagreements between the panellists or between the anchor and the panellists—was observed through all seven episodes. Kashyap rarely opposed or intervened when hyper-nationalist and Islamophobic views were expressed by panellists in raised voices during the show. Aggressive interpersonal dynamics, displayed through recurrent interruptions and derision (laughing at/mockings panellists), were frequent.

Overt sexism did not appear to be part of Kashyap's journalistic approach; yet, when a panellist engaged in casual sexism by shutting down a female panellist, Kashyap usually either ignored the act or shifted the focus of the debate elsewhere. This suggests an ambiguous attitude at best, with Kashyap possibly attempting to convey subtle disapproval without obviously calling out such behaviour. It is worth noting that women constituted only 2.3% of the total number of



panellists invited to appear on the show. In an episode centred around the sexual assault and murder of a Dalit girl in Delhi (4 August 2021), the majority of the panellists, most of them dominant-caste, reiterated that the caste of the victim and/or perpetrators was unimportant in any conversation about the crime. This is despite the fact that it is well-documented that caste hierarchies play a significant, even oversized, role in gender-related crimes against women in India. This was a lost opportunity to address such issues head on.

To summarise, patriarchal and masculine values, particularly with reference to the nation-state—its power, adherence to majoritarian ideals, unconditional loyalty and intolerance for dissent—were often upheld during discussions on 'Halla Bol'. The strength of the state was invoked in hyperbolic and hyper-national terms through almost all the debates. Dissent within India was criticised or questioned; the concerns of those marginalised by caste and religion were often framed only within electoral outcomes; and jingoistic rhetoric was used against Pakistan, especially in debates around the Taliban during this period. While the anchors themselves did not use explicitly gendered language, it was not uncommon for panellists to use ableist, gendered or classist language, which the anchors usually left unchecked. The debates were confrontational, high-pitched and aggressive; this behaviour was true of almost all panellists, barring one or two exceptions, regardless of their political affiliations.



## Mithila Mirror: Reflecting Reality, Calmly



Coverage of Bihar's Panchayat elections in 2021 by Mithila Mirror, a Maithili language news channel, was studied across a week in September 2021. Seven episodes of the talk show 'Kahiyau Mukhiya Ji' (Let's Talk Sarpanch Ji) during this period were chosen for study.

Overall, the episodes under review did not contain overt displays of aggression from the different anchors of the show. All seven episodes had reporters/interviewers calmly asking questions to the interviewees with a view to seeking information. Even when interviewees appeared visibly agitated during some news reports, the journalist maintained a stoic face and seemed to be asking genuine follow-up questions that were not confrontational in tone. For instance, in the episode that aired on 22 September 2021, the female interviewees heatedly expressed their distress about the Panchayat authorities and the head of the council for their lack of accountability, for not fulfilling promises and working for community welfare. The reporter, Sneha Jha, was polite and respectful towards the women, and did not raise her voice even when emotions ran high. Mithila Mirror journalists were generally found cooperating with the interviewees instead of confronting/badgering them with rapid questions.

The journalists functioned as active listeners who were empathetic towards the interviewees and their concerns. Interruptions were rarely observed, and ample time was provided to the interviewees to clearly answer questions. Rare instances of a reporter getting defensive were observed; however, this happened only in a context where the interviewee directly questioned the credibility of the media organisation. For example, in the episode that aired on 19 September, the show's host, Lalit Narayan Jha, was observed defending the credentials of Mithila Mirror against claims of bribery/false reporting by the interviewee. However, the defence was done calmly. Such isolated instances do not indicate a culture of dominance in the journalistic approach of the channel.

Overt sexism was minimal in Mithila Mirror's journalistic coverage over the seven episodes. However, in the episode that aired on 20 September, Lalit Narayan Jha, this time in his role as reporter, used an inappropriate slang term to refer to women; such behaviour was not repeated by any journalist in any of the other episodes studied.

Overall, Mithila Mirror's coverage of the Bihar Panchayat elections in 2021 was not overtly aggressive, dominantly masculine or sexist.

## Indian Television's Coverage of Afghanistan



The Taliban's seizure of control in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, which hastened the withdrawal of international military, especially that of the US, from the country after 20 years was a dramatic international event. Coverage of these developments on Indian television news channels was studied as several Indian TV news channels chose to cover this topic multiple times, from varied angles, for their primetime debate shows during the study period. This analysis is of coverage by India Today (English), Zee News (Hindi), CNN-News 18 (English) and Republic (English). These channels represent different ideological leanings, with Zee News and Republic typically showing a markedly hyper-nationalist stance, whereas the element of hypernationalism on the other two channels is sporadic.

The news channels showed varied levels of aggression in both news visualisation and the concerned journalists' performances on various talk shows. The majority of channels utilised loud, aggressive music, as well as raised voices for the voice-over, while presenting the news.

Most of the Indian channels focused on Pakistan's role in the new scenario in Afghanistan, alluding to Indo-Pak relations in the wake of this event. For instance, Zee News ran a talk show named

'The Great Game of Afghanistan' that was designed to be sensational. The accompanying visual was a chessboard with chess pieces depicting major countries with stakes in Afghanistan. The audio-visuals deployed in the show included triggering sounds of bombs, smoke and the cries of frightened people.

Republic TV's coverage of this media event can be taken as an exemplification of aggression and dominance in a talk show format. "The Debate", hosted by Arnab Goswami, known for his very particular brand of aggressive presentation, included several instances in which the anchor as well as panellists used raised voices, speaking over each other and interrupting others during the show. Demeaning language was used. Extreme jingoism and hyper-nationalism were on display, with the debate set up in a confrontational style, with the screen divided into those 'supporting India' and those 'supporting Pakistan'.

While overt sexism was not observed, the relative absence of women panellists on the debate shows had to be taken into account. An example of good reportage was found in one talk show by India Today, which respectfully asked Afghan female students about their fears and thoughts on the situation.

However, on the whole, coverage of the impact of the Taliban takeover on women in the country lacked depth.

# Dominant Archetypes on Indian Television

How does a journalist learn to anchor the news or a talk show in a scenario where aggressive masculinity dominates, yielding visibility and success? Since training is not easy to come by, the easiest way is to learn through imitation. There are plenty of models to learn from, and these choices can be expressed in terms of 'anchoring archetypes'.

## 1. 'Breathless reporter' archetype.

Here, the anchor's persona is modeled on that of a reporter with the latest facts. The body language is crisp and lines are delivered in a no nonsense, rushed style. The challenge for the would-be anchor is that, in order to be successful in this style, one actually needs 'taaza' (fresh) information, which can be hard to come by unless the anchor is also a reporter with lots of contacts.

- **Difficulty level:** Easy to imitate but difficult to pull off consistently, unless one has experience and actual stuff to say.
- **Toxic masculinity level:** Not too much but depends on the anchor.

## 2. Narada archetype

Narada is a much-loved character in Hindu mythology—a traveling musician who carries news and plants ideas in people's minds. An aspiring anchor can carry off the Narada archetype so long as he or she has plenty of charm and wit.

- **Difficulty level:** Difficult to master. Narada types are not easily found.
- **Toxic masculinity level:** Not much.

## 3. Bhishma Pitamaha archetype

Bhishma is a complex figure in the Mahabharata but can easily be caricatured as a 'wise old man'. Anchors who aspire to this archetype try to put themselves across as the weary know-it-all. If not careful, the Bhishma figure can come across as patronising.

- **Difficulty level:** Easy to imitate at a superficial level.
- **Toxic masculinity level:** Can be high, especially if the anchor is male.

## 4. 'Angry young man' archetype

It's easy to be angry while on air because whipping oneself into a self-righteous fury is not too hard. This persona is made for the TV news format and for short discussions.

- **Difficulty level:** Easiest to learn, therefore common
- **Toxic masculinity level:** High, whether the anchor is a man or a woman.

## 5. 'Mr. Reasonable' archetype

A reaction to the 'angry young man' epidemic perhaps. Here, the anchor goes out of the way to come across as calm and reasonable.

- **Difficulty level:** Difficult, because it requires years of experience.
- **Toxic masculinity level:** Can be high, because one can come across as a male bigot even while not being aggressive.

Contributed by H.R. Venkatesh

## 5. Masculinities on Social Media

There is little doubt that public conversation in India, as in many other parts of the world, has of late been polarised around various axes, from religion to gender to caste and other identities, as well as various ideologies. The proliferation of social media has fuelled the influx of what were once considered fringe ideas into the mainstream. These have then found expression in instantly generated and refashioned memes, forwarded through community and family networks to create or solidify alignments, coming to settle in the minds of people, sometimes catalysing them into action or reaction.

There has undoubtedly been an upsurge of toxic masculinity in Narendra Modi's India. This "Modi-masculinity" (Srivastava, 2015) draws from tropes that originate in the political realm and news coverage of it, and is then repurposed through various social media formats as commentary, sometimes ironic and purportedly humorous, but invariably riding on the undercurrents of a hyper-nationalist, anti-minority in general, Islamophobic in particular, often misogynistic, ideology. These go on to become part of a larger social media discourse that plays around specific ideas of what it means to be a 'real' man, a good and true Indian, a good citizen-patriot, a cultural native, among other things.

Branding all those who may be critical of the ruling ideology as "anti-national" and disallowing their right to dissent through verbal abuse and assault have become all too common in the Indian public discourse. De points to the extensive trolling campaign against journalist Rana Ayyub and other work on Hindutva masculinities (Chakraborty 2011, Chaturvedi 2016) to make the case that this discourse pervades the Indian digital ecosystem, finding expression in acts of extreme online violence that has the potential to spill over into physical spaces.

Much of this work points to how social media users—largely men but also women—often aggressively affirm their alignment with the dominant (patriarchal, nationalist) ideology by participating in this discourse, either generating or redistributing and endorsing content of a hyper-masculine nature. There is pressure within kinship groups and other social in-groups to accept these ideas or at least remain silent, allowing what may have otherwise remained marginal to occupy a firm position in the public imagination and assert itself as mainstream. Referring to Hindutva masculinities, De notes: "Both ground-level majoritarian Hindu politics and their vocal supporters on digital media inform and strengthen the other,

existing in a mutually symbiotic relationship." (2021, 73). Such sharing on social media makes it possible for hyper-masculinist discourse to find audiences and create what might be called "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015), through mediated feelings of connectedness.

A major social media "event" that illustrates this is the "Sulli deals" case, where, in July 2021, unsuspecting Muslim women found themselves "offered for sale" on the open source developer platform GitHub. More than 80 Muslim women, including many who had drawn Hindutva ire for their work as activists, journalists, academics and social workers, found their photographs posted on the site and circulated on social media, setting off a wave of misogynistic and Islamophobic comments. While a criminal report was filed and an investigation launched, little was done to hold to account GitHub or any of the platforms through which the images were subsequently shared. This discourse gathered steam in a context ripe for the uptake of such content. Barely six months later, in January 2022, a similar site was launched—again on GitHub—under the name "Bulli Bai", once again sharing illegally obtained photographs of a number of Muslim women fitting the same profiles as earlier ("Bulli" and "Sulli" are derogatory words for Muslim women).

Those implicated in the recent case are young, technologically savvy individuals who plug into an existing male/ caste/ religious supremacist conversation online. The use of such derogatory terminology to classify outspoken women once again found gleeful endorsement online. In addition, there are the algorithmic machinations that occur behind the scenes, as the online news portal The Wire found, in an investigation of an app called TekFog which was used to communalise and polarise conversations on platforms like Twitter, particularly targeting women journalists and activists. The ease with which these representations are generated and circulated is catalysed by the click-and-share culture of social media.



The relative permanence of online content, and the possibility of recirculation out of context has serious implications not only for the security and well-being of the individuals targeted, but for the broader public discourse.

Against this backdrop, the M3 study includes a limited examination of the circulation of hyper-masculinist ideas on social media and the discourse emanating from it. Some examples selected for scrutiny are presented here.

## Ripped jeans and the guardians of culture

In March 2021, the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, Tirath Singh Rawat, associated ripped jeans with societal collapse and expressed “shock” at a “mother” who wore frayed denim pants. Five days after this comment, he went on to further explain his initial comment. “I am not against people wearing clothes of their choice. I, too, have a daughter. But while clothing is an individual choice, people should respect their culture and traditions... We have examples like Rani Laxmi Bai, who fought battles in a saree.” A few days later, when a minister in Tamil Nadu said women no longer have hips shaped like “8” because they drink milk from foreign cows, the incident was politicised.



Memes like the ones above erupted across various social media platforms, with conversations on Twitter and Instagram taking the lead. The polarised responses came from both sides of the ideological divide, some denouncing actor Gul Panag (the woman defiantly wearing ripped jeans in the photograph) and others defending her right to dress as she chose. Debates focused on motherhood and culture, reducing



ideas of caring and nurturing to choice of attire. It would seem that to the person who shared the two photos, the mother wearing ripped jeans was not sufficiently caring, while the mother wearing a saree was the epitome of love and affection.

While making allowances for the Twitter algorithm working in ways that reinforce each user's preferences, it was noted that those who criticised the politicians' statements were larger in number than those who came out in support. Nevertheless, Gul Panag was heavily trolled for her act of resistance in posting the photograph, and some accounts questioned the authenticity of her motherhood and suggested that she was not "mother enough".

## "Didi o Didi"

During the election campaign in Bengal during the state Assembly polls in 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi indirectly addressed Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee with a sarcastic taunt, "Didi o Didi". In a state in which 49% of the electorate comprises women, Narendra Modi's repeated use of the derisive phrase created a lot of media buzz. A day after it was first used, Lok Sabha member Mahua Moitra, who belongs to the Trinamool Congress party (TMC) headed by Banerjee, strongly objected to the comment on television, comparing it to

tone to subject young women in Kolkata to street harassment. This is an example of how misogynistic language used by politicians with a large following that the media further amplifies can easily move from the space of political campaigns into the popular domain.



the cat-calls made by a 'street-side fellow'. A pushback began on social media after this. West Bengal's leading newspaper, The Telegraph, carried a story on the issue, headlined 'Looks like PM speaks like comment mara boy' ('street-side fellow'). The counter pushback from Modi supporters defended the PM's language, going so far as to note that Banerjee was not "deserving" of the term "didi". Interestingly, there were reports of men using the term, even mimicking the Prime Minister's

Mahua Moitra  
@MahuaMoitra

"Didi O Didi" says PM  
"Modi Go Modi" says Bengal



During the Assembly elections in March-April 2021, outspoken West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is demonised in sexist and Islamophobic social media memes.

## Women in politics, the kitchen, and masculinist dismissal

The use of misogynistic language to trivialise arguments between women politicians as "catfights", the ridiculing of assertive women as unfeminine or, conversely, the labelling of male opponents as effeminate for perceived weakness are not new. However, such behaviour gains extended life on social media. Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been a prime target of such ridicule. For example, in this meme that was in circulation in May 2021, Banerjee's face was morphed onto a famous photograph of actor Priyanka Chopra with a deliberately exaggerated, dramatic hairdo and makeup from the 2019 Met Gala in New York. While it was dismissed by many Modi supporters as simply part of the election game, it could also be read as an instance of the male gaze working to objectify and trivialise



women. The visual was not accompanied by any text, leaving it open to interpretation by the viewer. Objections from the CM's camp were met with derision from the oppositional party, with comments like "Mamata should teach drama" and tags like "Baghdidi" (tigress) signalling her fierce intolerance of criticism. All the memes featuring Banerjee appeared to depict her as a witch (*dayen*), a blood sucking vampire or an unlettered person who frequently mispronounced words. On social media at least there was little discussion about her hard work over many years, her commitment or her strengths as a self-made woman leader.

The second meme, with a panel of Bengali text, describes the relationship between India and Pakistan as akin to the fraught relationship between (mostly) female in-laws, a problem comparable to a domestic impasse that will never be resolved. The hapless



mother-in-law here is India and the conniving daughter-in-law is Pakistan. China is like the daughter-in-law's mother, who is constantly interfering and setting the younger woman against her mother-in-law. The sister-in-law is compared to Russia, while Bangladesh is like the weak son and the USA like the father-in-law who tries to mediate without success. Finally, the Arab countries are like two-faced neighbours: sometimes on India's side and sometimes on Pakistan's.

Likening geopolitical dynamics to domestic disputes may, of course, be read as humour, but repeated use of the vocabulary of the domestic domain (traditionally feminine) to criticise women politicians in particular, while using the vocabulary of the political/business domain (conventionally masculine) to signal efficient or powerful management has the effect of assigning a negative value to all things feminine and thus, by implication, ascribing a positive tone to or valorising all things masculine.



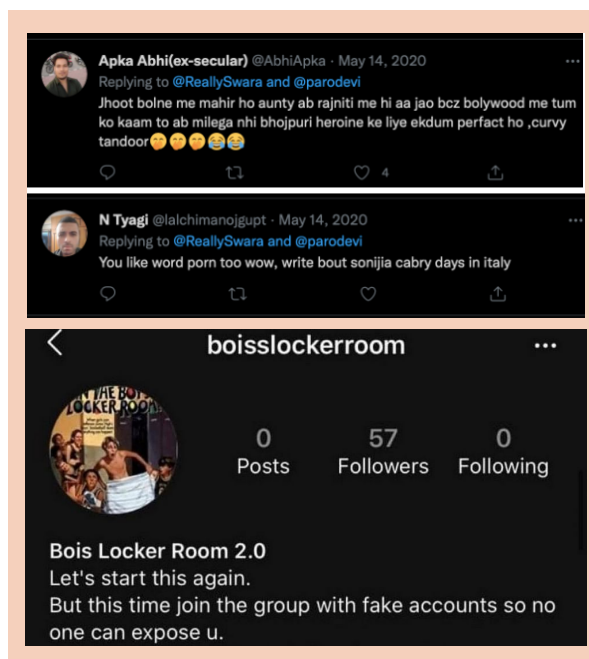
# Toxic masculinity and age-appropriate sex education on Twitter

The incident that came to be known as #BoisLockerRoom hit the headlines when it was revealed that a 100-member Instagram group, comprising schoolboys from Delhi aged 14 to 18, rated schoolgirls' body parts, and shared objectionable posts of young girls with sexually explicit content, morphing their heads onto naked bodies without their consent. The news broke out with revelations from the group chat on 2 May 2020 and received wide media coverage and social media engagement.

This example looks at the conversation generated around a tweet by actor Swara Bhasker, who retweeted Paromita Vohra's article titled 'Bois Locker Room case underscores vital need for radical, political reimagining of an education that liberates us,' published on FirstPost on 12 May 2020.



In her tweet, Swara Bhasker endorsed the article by Paromita Vohra while expressing her shock at the revelations in it of masculine exhibitionism in St. Stephen's College, New Delhi, in the 1980s—much before the Bois Locker Room incident. Vohra's article travelled back in time to draw parallels between the recent incident and the long-standing exhibition of masculinity in various ways as part of student life in elite educational institutions in India, which invariably involved mocking and sexually assessing girls and subjecting them to the male gaze and to intense sexual scrutiny. While the article grappled with the reality of young boys' predatory behaviour and sexual



criminality, it outlined solutions like age-appropriate sex education and ways to constructively deal with adolescent boys and their emerging sexuality.

The post received moderate to low engagement (36 retweets, 6 quote retweets and 339 Likes), suggesting that social media users did not read the article recommended by the celebrity endorser, whose engagement levels are otherwise quite high.

From the moderate engagement, it was evident that social media users were not interested in reading and responding to the recommended article. It is significant that comments on the tweet were highly toxic, brutally abusing and slut shaming the actor. A lot of the discourse was around nationalism, mocking the person behind the Twitter handle and her views in a major display of patriotic masculinity; the context of the post was not discussed at all while the trolling and abuse were centred on her non-allegiance to a particular type of nationalist ideology. The demonstration of parallel masculinities laced with hate, malice and sexism was very evident in the discourse generated by the commentary around the post.



## Can a male athlete be objectified?

Sports has for long been an intensely gendered sphere, that has differentially celebrated overt physicality (brawn for male athletes, appearance and grace for female athletes) in ways that are stereotypically associated with men or women. Popular commentary about female athletes often celebrates appearance and feminine attributes over performance, something that female sportspersons have for long resisted. The example below inverts this expectation, overtly, and even exaggeratedly, celebrating physical appearance and downplaying sporting skill.

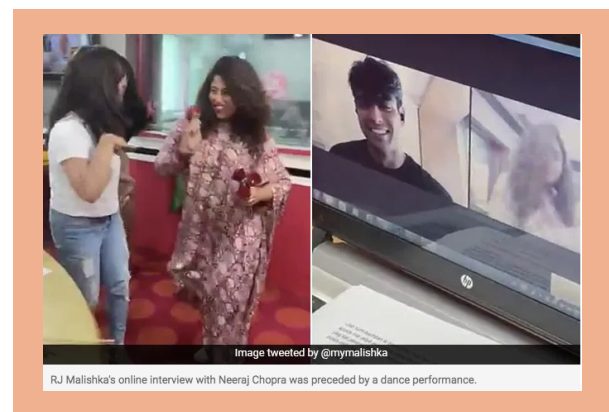
Following javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra's win at the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2021, Radio Jockey (@RJ Malishka) posted a teaser video pointing to her interview with the gold medallist. In the tweet accompanying the teaser, the RJ called attention to Chopra's looks rather than his performance. Posted on 19 August 2021, the tweet received significant engagement: the video garnered 1.5 million views, 1413 retweets, 5372 quote tweets and 8889 likes (until 1 October 2021). While the interview itself was occasioned by the athlete's victory at the games, the



framing of the tweet drew attention to his looks, inviting a presumably female audience (“Ladiesss”) to focus on his physical attributes. The 45-second teaser video shows the radio team—women fans—dancing presumably for Chopra, who waits to be interviewed on the other side of a laptop screen. The video, and the accompanying tweet, could be interpreted in multiple, possibly contradictory ways; as women choosing to

offer themselves up for the gaze of a successful male, drawing on their own sexual agency, or as pandering to the ego of a successful and attractive man and thus subjecting themselves to the male gaze even as they objectify him.

The comments reflect a discomfort with what may be seen as a reversal of gender roles, some taking strong exception to the “cringe act” and others going so far as to call the women's behaviour “disgusting”, expressing a latent misogyny that denies women the license that men routinely claim to look at women in sexualised ways. Some of the comments are blatantly hostile and offensive, as in: “RedFM needs to install some poles in the office.” Or the outrage expressed by this respondent who seems to forget that this type of sexualisation is normally reserved for women athletes: “Can you please stop romanticising male players? They are much more than a sexual object.” The responses to RJ Malishka's tweet reveal the extent to which a somewhat innocuous, even playful, reversal of gender norms can spark a hostile pushback. Women's objectification is so routine that it often goes unnoticed. But when a man is objectified (by women), both the articulation and intensity of criticism, as well as the degree of censure on social media seems to be more visible.



## Masculinity in the domestic sphere

A tweet with a meme was posted under the initiative, The Boys Talk Project, by activist Sairee Chahal Sheroes on 9 October 2019. The project was initiated by the Aangan Trust with the aim of sensitising Indian boys on issues of gender and masculinity. The project started the hashtag #MentalHealthAndMasculinity to encourage an open social media conversation on issues around the mental health of boys. The very low levels of engagement with the tweet (1 comment, 2 quote retweets and 8 likes) suggest that there is little awareness or interest amongst social media users about the mental health of boys. Low engagement can also be due to the fact that the tweet opposed/questioned the gender stereotypes prevalent in society. Any media text that could initiate a debate on the subject is clearly not welcome. The tweet originated from the official twitter handle of a female influencer who contests stereotypical gender roles and questions the gender binaries of sport vs dance and men vs women for household work. It used the hashtag

#MentalHealthAndMasculinity, associated with the Boys Talk project.

The big idea in the meme was that domestic chores know no gender. It presented a conversation between two young males in which one is the prototype of patriarchal masculinity and the other an exemplar of un-stereotyped and unconditioned malehood who exercises freedom of choice and does not normalise conventional masculinity. The tweet and the meme aimed to reframe the functional codes of masculinity. However, the meme ended with a negative/castigating reaction of the first boy, a conveyor of conventional masculine frames, illustrating that the problem is deep-seated and may not be successfully addressed through a single oppositional voice. The limited social media engagement garnered by the tweet (one like, one quote tweet and eight retweets) indicates that the questioning of gender stereotypes does not generate much conversation on social media.



The above cited examples give us a flavour of the gendered nature of discourse on social media platforms, a space that trades in instant message creation and superfast response times. Several scholars have noted the pernicious effects of the circulation of such messages on social media; they transmit a mood, a tone, and a flattened message that resonates or is in conflict with existing beliefs and prejudices, thus either sparking enthusiastic agreement or violent rejection. Nuanced messaging that attempts to educate without throwing out a direct challenge (as in the Boy Talk example) tends to find little uptake. Rarely do they lead to real dialogue or discussion; instead they are passed on from phone to phone, travelling through already polarised publics. Sahana Udupa, who studies online hate and social media political discourse in India, points to the presence of what she refers to as "Gaali" culture, to "capture the interlocking practices of insult, comedy, shame and abuse that unfold in a blurred arena of online speech" (Udupa, 2017, 1509). When this culture of Gaali meets hegemonic masculinity, the performance can become dangerously toxic—to those it targets and those who are nurtured to further spread it.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

**One week in the life of media does not tell the complete story, but it certainly offers a window into news presentation practices that have been baked into television formats, becoming part of the socialisation of journalists across genders. The above analysis may not have yielded dramatic results in relation to the presence of an aggressively masculinist discourse. However, this could be a function of a larger culture that normalises such behaviours as essential to the performance of journalism to such an extent that it is not noticeable unless it is specifically interrogated using the discursive filters of gender and power.**

It is important to note that the focus of this study was not on news bias or framing but, for the first time in India, on the performativity of the reporter/host. The differences observed across formats are particularly noteworthy. While straightforward news, as told in prime-time news bulletins, is relatively neutral in performative traits, in talk shows, masculinities play out in ways that are clearly hegemonic. The space of a talk show is less constrained by the tenets of objectivity and balance, and thus allows for a greater range of behavioural display. It is also clear that it is the overall tone of presentation that conveys, and ultimately valorises, masculinist attitudes. This includes loud and dramatic music that underscores aggressive headlines, both spoken and shown as text on screen, studio backdrops, and graphic elements—including the use of “angry colours” (red, bright orange)—and recurring animations that flash as anchors speak.

The methodology of this monitoring exercise could be further refined and applied for a longer period to a systematically sampled set of channels from across the country, based on viewership, and including variables such as the popularity of the host and the design and nature of programming. The coding framework used in this project was devised in a short time with a limited purpose in mind, but it could be validated and developed into a frame much like the Bechdel Test to check the levels of hegemonic masculinities in news media content.

Another area that deserves more careful study is the generation and circulation of toxic masculinity in social media, where content is generated and shared not only by journalists but a wide range of participants—including non-human actors such as bots. Such content is in competition with journalistic reportage, and is often a deliberate attempt to vitiate the discourse. The examples provided in this report point to this; a deeper analysis is certainly warranted.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study has allowed us to train a lens on the pervasive, often invisible and insidious, ways in which journalistic performance valorises and normalises hegemonic gender norms and social relations through the adoption of aggressive, dominant and sexist behaviours associated with masculinity. If patriarchy is one of the overarching frameworks that drives and organises the multiple spheres of social, political, cultural and professional life, the effort to understand and identify the many factors that define gender politics requires that we work at multiple levels—structural and organisational, community and individual. The media as an institution and a practice have acquired a significant role in shaping, disseminating and reinforcing ideas about how to engage across private and public spheres, and the news media in particular set the tone not only for what we talk about but how we talk. For those who inhabit the media space, a move towards changing dominant patterns of performing professionalism calls for a new professional vocabulary that expresses a new set of values. These values would speak to equality, inclusion, respect, and be performed through acts of empathetic listening, thoughtful consideration of evidence, and an emphasis on collaboration over competition. While challenging authority is perhaps essential to the function of good journalism, the expression of such challenges should be mindful of power differentials that operate across caste, class, gender, ability and other lines.

### Notes from a round table

The discussion at the round table meeting in Delhi in December 2021 (which included activists, journalists, academics and writers) brought up many important points relating to the context, content, and delivery formats (words, images, graphics, sound, affect) of television news, as well as the many factors—both political and economic—that constrain change. It is

clear that television news has undergone a sea-change over the past few decades, with considerable time now devoted to opinionated content and so-called debate, with the time and space for direct, fact-based storytelling diminishing. The attempt during the meeting was to lay out and understand the forces that move media, both in terms of what is covered and how it is covered. The main points emerging from this brainstorming are summarised below to offer additional context and possible directions for a way forward.

## Metrics and confrontational coverage

Participants observed that there is a growing trend among some television channels to offer more grounded, field-based coverage on their digital platforms, suggesting that they are aware of an audience that wants such content. These digital channels seem to be filling a void left by the shift away from ground reporting on TV, which requires more resources. Such digital programming, including YouTube channels launched by prominent journalists formerly in electronic media, has received an extremely favourable response, if clicks and hits are any indication. There needs to be more audience research to evaluate the argument that aggressive performativity begets greater views since this is the justification provided by management and editorial heads for the shouting matches that currently pass for news television. It is crucial to systematically build an argument for a different style of journalism that foregrounds journalistic standards and ethics. By casting itself as a carrier of content rather than as a producer, social media benefits from the growing polarisation in the public sphere; here the concern is with appropriate regulation rather than a voluntary code of conduct. With recent data indicating that Google and Facebook make more money than the top ten global media firms put together, the shift of news media to digital platforms and social media attains more significance in terms of how we approach the contentious issue of regulation and ethical standards.

## The intransigent model of television news

Regarding the political economy of news media (flagged above), some participants expressed the view that alternative modes of operation are antithetical to the business of television. According to them, for

television journalism to be free of toxic masculinity, it needs to be discourse driven, open to listening to different points of view, embracing ambiguity and uncertainty, acknowledging that there are no easy answers to many of the questions discussed on shows and, accordingly, steering clear of the straight-faced, arrogant delivery of opinion parading as fact that has become the norm in recent times. So, is television news fixable? That depends on metrics again: if there is an audience for content that reflects the values outlined here, research needs to demonstrate their existence and document their preference for a different, saner model of news delivery.

## Intersectional implications

The discussion highlighted the fact that hegemonic masculinity as expressed in the media is inextricably linked to other oppressive ideologies that perpetuate caste, religious, ethnic, linguistic and other forms of discrimination. It is therefore almost impossible to address it in isolation. The aggression related to gender performance derives from a general acceptance that this is how journalism is to be done—that professional competence is communicated in such ways, without regard to how it might perpetuate historical oppression of marginalised genders, castes, minorities and people with disabilities. While this study focused on news media, participants underscored the need to examine the implications of the toxic masculinity replete in popular culture. It was pointed out that this plays a big role in creating aspirational models of masculinity for young boys and actively sidelines other, more desirable, ways of being for men, while also implicitly telling women that this is what they should expect from men.

## The question of vocabulary and identity

Participants discussed the possibility of finding a better description for what the project has called “hegemonic/toxic masculinity”. Some, who work with young men, pointed out that it may be necessary to de-link toxic behaviour with a gendered identity. According to them, the unquestioning association of such behaviour with the male identity could lead to anxieties about what it means to be a man and fears that maleness itself is under attack. Others wanted to know whether and where there were visible and accessible spaces for non-normative men to perform a different kind of masculinity. It is important to address these questions since they highlight the implications of the undifferentiated term “hegemonic/toxic masculinity”



for young men and/or persons expressing other non-normative identities. While a more nuanced discussion of this issue is outside the scope of this report, this is a pertinent point to consider going forward, especially while planning training and creating training materials.

## Diversity and inclusion

Participants pointed out that while it is necessary to increase the number of women, trans and queer folk, marginalised castes and/or minorities working in the media, that is unlikely to be sufficient to make a difference in either news content or performative masculinity. It was accepted that increased numbers of people from hitherto under-represented or unrepresented groups can make a positive difference to newsroom culture, editorial decision-making and the empowerment of change agents. However, it was also pointed out that token representation may actually reinforce the dominant institutional ideology instead of challenging it, with outnumbered members of such groups under pressure to conform in order to

survive, if not succeed. This harks back to the Critical Mass Theory in gender politics and collective political action, with critical mass defined as the critical number of people required to affect policy and actually make changes.

## Performativity on screen hides other forms of toxicity

Several participants pointed out that what appears on screen as toxic masculinity is just the most visible part of many other gender-based oppressions that exist in the news process. These may range from the distribution of assignments and allocation of resources to overseeing of roles, treatment of content, and even seemingly minor but pivotal tasks such as the wording of ticker content. Often there is pressure on women journalists to become “one of the boys” and ignore or actively participate in masculinist behaviours. Research is needed to understand the sociology of newsrooms and the ways in which misogynistic and masculinist cultures seep into different aspects of news-making.



# Possible ways forward

The following recommendations and suggestions are based on the insights gained through the immersive monitoring and analysis of television news programmes, talk shows and social media, the observations and comments of members of the project team, and the points raised by participants in the two-day round table consultation. We hope news organisations, individual journalists and journalism educators will consider taking them into account so as to address the problem of harmful gender norms in the presentation of news, or what we have described here as hegemonic masculinities through journalistic performance.

It is important to acknowledge that many kinds of toxicity exist in our media workspaces and, more broadly, in society. Some of these are barely discernible but have very real consequences in terms of how power is distributed, exercised and experienced. While some forms of toxic masculinity are directly and powerfully visible and audible, there are others that are less perceptible, more subtle and thereby more insidious, communicating gender superiority through selective or biased framing of news and opinions.

Understanding journalistic performativity through a gendered lens and connecting it to the toxicity that exists in other spheres of life is a starting point. At a fundamental level, we need to ask what media organisations, professionals, educators and audiences can do to engage in a more gender-critical manner with the process and products of news. And perhaps most importantly, we need to return to an ethical framework of news production. That may not necessarily be the cheapest way to do news, but it is certainly the most fair, accurate and just way to do news.

We believe that further examination and discussion of the insights gained through this project can generate ideas for more research and forms of practice that will add to our understanding of the current situation of the media and point the way towards a more compassionate, credible and dialogic media environment, which would be better placed to foster a less polarised, more open, public discourse.

Our recommendations address multiple levels and layers of the news system, and point to the need for a systemic change, but also to simple steps that require organisational will and individual motivation.

## 1. Enhancement of professionalism

News media houses need to consciously exercise responsibility in covering sensitive issues and eschew sensationalism and divisiveness. Media houses must initiate internal review processes by public editors and develop internal codes of conduct that senior editors adopt and enforce by example. Steps could include the following:

- a. Enforce existing codes of conduct and develop guidelines for ethical journalism addressing issues such as toxic masculinist performativity on television, epitomised by sensationalism, dramatisation, aggression and hyper-nationalism.
- b. Develop an Ethical Editorial Handbook collaboratively, involving professional organisations like the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) and the NWMI and other media and civil society groups. This could be distributed by NBA to TV channels and journalism schools.
- c. Create a checklist to score journalistic performance and programming on a toxic masculinity scale, drawing on the experimental framework developed for this project.

## 2. Framing and execution of news and talk shows

Current formats are largely built around the creation of polarities and promotion of confrontation. Such polarisation, sometimes involving incendiary framing, violates journalistic ethics as well as laws governing free speech. There is a need to implement small but significant changes in the overall design of news shows, framing and posing of questions, and panel moderation, with more emphasis on listening, turn taking and constructive engagement.

- a. Those who control the panel—the anchor or host—must not only allow for a variety of voices to emerge, but actively encourage views that are not often heard in the public arena.
- b. It is also important to recognise that inappropriate, dramatic use of music, sound and video editing effects,

graphics, tickers, even costumes, can and do often enhance toxicity, making news presentation appear louder and more aggressive than need be. It is necessary to minimise the use of such elements and aim for better professional standards in television journalism and news production.

c. Another factor that enables hegemonic presentations is the near absence in television news today of field/ground reports, which makes anchors more central to news presentation and enables hegemonic presentations. More coverage from the field and less focus on anchor-driven news shows would take care of some of the ills that currently beset TV news.

d. Greater diversity of guests on panels and talk shows is crucial. It is particularly important to include members of groups that have historically been marginalised on the basis of gender, caste, creed and other identities, class, occupation, location, disability, sexual orientation and so on. Diversity and inclusion must go beyond mechanical representation and tokenism. In many other spheres of public life, such as business, education and, yes, even politics, inclusion beyond representation has been actively pursued. Media organisations need to do more in this regard.

### 3. Sensitisation and Training

Everyone involved, from reporters and anchors to decision-makers in the management and ownership structures, must be sensitised about the ramifications of hyper masculinist (re)presentations. Journalists have long been exposed to initiatives aiming at gender sensitisation, but these tend to focus on improving coverage of women's/gender issues, enhancing sensitivity to sources and situations, encouraging diversity and inclusivity in media content as well as media personnel, and so on. It is necessary to add an extra layer of sensitivity to the values embedded in and communicated through journalistic performativity. This can be effected in the following ways:

a. Developing modules on gender performativity, particularly hegemonic masculinity, and its social and cultural consequences, that can be added to the curricula of educational institutions offering courses in mass communications and journalism.

b. Working with human resources teams of media organisations to develop and offer workshops for early and mid-career journalists that encourage reflection on current toxic mores and ways to counter and rectify them.

c. Round table discussions with senior journalists to foster ethical reflection and point towards pragmatic ways to change existing norms.

d. Journalists from traditionally marginalised communities, including women, would benefit from rights-based workshops, training in specialised areas such as the law, and learning circles that can enhance both knowledge and confidence.

### 4. Amplification of good practices:

Civil society members and media watchdogs can continuously highlight examples of more balanced and ethical approaches to reporting and news presentation that are more discourse driven, open to listening and debate, and comfortable with ambiguity. Journalists who consciously reject a masculinist style can be encouraged to share their approach to professional performance. An award can be created to recognise journalists who eschew stereotypical forms of masculinity and/or adopt gender-positive professional norms.

### 5. Adherence to public responsibility

Above all, specific codes of conduct are required for social media teams within media houses since news delivered via such platforms is consumed faster, is prone to rapid circulation and can trigger quick reactions.

### 6. Holding multiple stakeholders accountable

While social media companies and technology platforms were not a systematic focus in this study, it is clear that these “intermediaries” play an important role in amplifying the worst practices of legacy media, and as we have seen more recently, in creating and disseminating extremely toxic content. Media companies need to pay more attention to the sources of such content, calling out attempts to influence the discourse both from within and outside the media.

These recommendations are not idealistic, they are instead deeply pragmatic. The recommended actions are important for the health of both the media and journalists, and for the health of the societies that they serve.

# The Television Anchor's Self-Care Checklist

Do you work in television as an anchor or reporter? Are you worried about the toxic masculinity virus and all its variants? Here's a checklist that can help you test for toxic masculinity, vaccinate against and boost your immunity.



Give yourself one point if you answer yes to any questions.

- ☒ Do you feel a constant urge to tell your panellists that they are wrong, totally wrong, completely wrong?
- ☒ Do you ask your panellists questions, but interrupt them after the first two words?
- ☒ Are you immediately offended on behalf of every institution of power in the country - the government, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the neighbourhood uncle?
- ☒ Do you ask rude and loaded questions to put panellists on the spot?
- ☒ When discussing victim-survivors of violence do you regularly ask with a furrowed brow: "Did they not bring this on themselves?"
- ☒ Is your arched nose on high alert to sniff out any dissent?
- ☒ Do you bang on the table when someone disagrees with you?
- ☒ Do your friends and relatives in your hometown joke that you don't need a phone to call them, given your volume?
- ☒ Are you determined to show that every panellist is potentially an "anti-national" unless they loudly prove otherwise? And sometimes not even then.
- ☒ Are the cockles of your heart warmed when panellists start shouting at each other?
- ☒ Do you use the most unwarranted re-creation of scenes, sound effects and props to underline your point?
- ☒ Do you never notice that your panels are all manels?
- ☒ Do you never notice that your panels are all savarna?
- ☒ Do your friends sometimes say, you have changed a lot since you start working in TV?

## How did you score?

**If you scored less than 2:** You have so little toxic masculinity, your viewers, panellists and colleagues know you as a warm, trustworthy bestie. Keep calm and stay vigilant.

**If you scored between 2-7:** You have a dangerous condition. It's bad for your health, bad for your viewers and bad for the country. If you take a hard look at yourself you can get out of the sludge and cultivate a wholesome new phase of your career.

**If you scored between 7-12:** Boss, we have to say it. You are so deep in the toxic pool, we will need a Hazmat suit to lend you a hand. With some serious introspection and major behavioural change, you may be able to trudge out of the swamp.



What behaviour change, you may ask. Now that the diagnosis is done, we will tell you how to boost your immunity. Add a point for every change you make to your on-air behaviour.

- ✓ You allow and enable panellists to make their points.
- ✓ You respectfully listen to panellists even if their views differ from yours or that of the channel.
- ✓ You do not instigate panellists into pointless no-win arguments.
- ✓ You intervene when panellists attack each other. You create conditions for healthy, non-boring debate.
- ✓ You remember that it is not your job to defend the ruling party or government.
- ✓ You are considerate and careful when dealing with survivors of crimes or their loved ones because you know trauma is real.
- ✓ You construct your panels to make space for a diversity of views and dissenting views.
- ✓ You clench your fist under the table when you feel the old urge to bang that innocent piece of furniture. You can do it!
- ✓ You allow for ambiguity. You don't know everything. You can't know everything and that's ok!
- ✓ You exert volume control and your viewers compliment you for self-control, grace and dexterity. Neighbours' children and pets do not run away with their ears covered when they see you now.
- ✓ You know that you are not in charge of defending the nation's honour.
- ✓ You know that dissent is essential for a healthy democracy.
- ✓ Your props are sober, your music is appropriate.
- ✓ You deftly avoid manels, and token representation.
- ✓ You shake your head sadly at folks who don't understand that the genuine representation of women, trans, queer, Adivasi, Dalit, Bahujan panellists is key to fair journalism. Shake, shake, shake your head.

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