The Role of Press Commissions in Shaping Media Policies in Post-Independence India

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Abstract

This research paper examines the role of Press Commissions in shaping media policies in post-independence India. It traces the evolution of these commissions, from the First Press Commission (1952-1954) to the Second Press Commission (1978-1982), and their impact on the Indian media landscape. The study analyzes key recommendations made by these commissions and the resulting policies, focusing on the establishment of the Press Council of India, regulations on media ownership, working conditions for journalists, and the balance between press freedom and government control. The paper also explores the implementation challenges faced by these recommendations and their relevance in the current digital media ecosystem. Through a case study of the Working Journalists Act of 1955, the research illustrates the concrete impact of Press Commissions on media policy. The study concludes by discussing the evolving role of Press Commissions in addressing the challenges posed by digital media and the future outlook for media policy-making in India. While acknowledging the limitations of the traditional commission structure in the rapidly changing media environment, the paper argues that the principles established by these commissions continue to inform contemporary debates on media regulation, ethics, and freedom in India.

Keywords: Media regulation, media ownership, press council of India, first press commission, second press commission

Introduction

The concept of press freedom has been a cornerstone of India's democratic fabric since its independence in 1947. Enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, freedom of speech and expression has provided the foundation for a vibrant and diverse media landscape (Rao & Johal, 2006) [20]. However, the journey of press freedom in India has been marked by both triumphs and challenges, reflecting the complex interplay between democratic ideals and the practical realities of governance (Jeffrey, 2009).

In the post-independence era, India recognized the need for a structured approach to media regulation and policy formation. This led to the establishment of Press Commissions, which have played a crucial role in shaping the country's media policies (Kumar, 2015) [9]. These commissions, appointed by the government, have served as forums for comprehensive reviews of the press, its role in society, and the challenges it faces.

The First Press Commission (1952-1954) laid the groundwork for subsequent commissions, addressing issues such as the freedom of the press, the role of the press in a democracy, and the need for a regulatory body (Press Commission of India, 1954). The Second Press Commission (1978-1982) further expanded on these themes, adapting its recommendations to the evolving media landscape (Second Press Commission, 1982). These commissions, along with other committees and

reports, have significantly influenced the trajectory of media policies in India.

This research paper aims to examine the role of Press Commissions in shaping media policies in post-independence India. By analyzing the key recommendations of these commissions and their subsequent impact on policy formation, this study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the commission system in addressing the challenges faced by the Indian media and in promoting a free and responsible press.

Historical Context
A. Media Landscape in Immediate Post-Independence India

In the aftermath of India's independence in 1947, the media landscape was characterized by a mix of enthusiasm and challenges. The press, which had played a significant role in the freedom struggle, found itself at a crossroads (Raghavan, 1994) [18]. The immediate post-independence era saw a surge in newspaper circulation, with the number of daily newspapers increasing from 300 in 1947 to 743 by 1954 (Jeffrey, 2000) [7].

However, this growth was accompanied by several issues. Many newspapers faced financial constraints, leading to concerns about their sustainability and independence (Bhatt, 1997) [3]. The industry was also grappling with technological limitations, uneven distribution networks, and low literacy

rates, which restricted readership primarily to urban areas (Kumar, 2015) [9].

The ideological landscape of the media was diverse, reflecting the pluralistic nature of Indian society. While some publications aligned themselves with the newly formed government's nation-building agenda, others positioned themselves as voices of dissent and criticism (Sonwalkar, 2002) [24].

B. Need for Media Regulation and Policy Formation
The rapid growth and evolving role of the media in post-independence India necessitated a structured approach to regulation and policy formation. Several factors contributed to this need:

i). **Ensuring Press Freedom:** There was a pressing need to safeguard the freedom of the press while also defining its responsibilities in a newly independent nation (Rao & Johal, 2006) [20].

ii). **Addressing Ownership Concerns:** The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few industrial houses raised concerns about media independence and diversity of views (Press Commission of India, 1954).

iii). **Improving Professional Standards:** There was a recognized need to enhance the professional standards of journalism and working conditions for media personnel (Kumar, 2015) [9].

iv). **Balancing Public Interest:** The government sought to strike a balance between press freedom and national interests, particularly in matters of security and social harmony (Bhatt, 1997) [3].

v). **Adapting to Technological Changes:** The advent of radio and the potential for television broadcasting necessitated forward-looking policies (Jeffrey, 2000) [7].

These factors culminated in the establishment of the First Press Commission in 1952, marking the beginning of a systematic approach to media policy formation in independent India (Press Commission of India, 1954).

Major Press Commissions in Post-Independence India
A. First Press Commission (1952-1954)
The First Press Commission, established in 1952 under the chairmanship of Justice G.S. Rajadhyaksha, marked a significant milestone in India's approach to media regulation. Its primary objectives were to examine the state of the press, its role in a democracy, and to suggest measures for its growth and improvement (Press Commission of India, 1954).

Key recommendations of the First Press Commission included:

i). Establishment of the Press Council of India as a self-regulatory body for the press.

ii). Measures to prevent the concentration of ownership in the newspaper industry.

iii). Improvement of working conditions for journalists, including the implementation of a wage board.

iv). Emphasis on the social responsibility of the press (Kumar, 2015) [9].

The commission's report laid the foundation for several important developments in Indian media, including the Press Council Act of 1965 and the Working Journalists Act of 1955 (Rao & Johal, 2006) [20].

B. Second Press Commission (1978-1982)
The Second Press Commission, also known as the Pithroda Commission, was appointed in 1978 under the chairmanship of P.C. Goswami and later K.K. Mathew. It was tasked with reviewing the changes in the media landscape since the First Commission and addressing new challenges (Second Press Commission, 1982).

The Second Commission's key recommendations included:

i). Delinking of business and editorial functions in newspaper organizations.

ii). Restrictions on cross-media ownership to prevent monopolies.

iii). Establishment of a Mass Media Council to replace the Press Council, covering both print and electronic media.

iv). Emphasis on the development of small and medium newspapers (Kumar, 2015) [9].

While not all recommendations were implemented, the Second Commission's report significantly influenced media policy debates in the following decades (Jeffrey, 2000) [7].

C. Other Significant Committees or Commissions
i). **Kuldip Nayar Committee (1997):** This committee was formed to review the functioning of the Press Council of India. It recommended expanding the council's jurisdiction to include electronic media and enhancing its powers (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1997) [11].

ii). **Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) Recommendations (2008-2014):** While not a press commission per se, TRAI has played a crucial role in shaping media policies, particularly in the areas of cross-media ownership and digitalization of media (TRAI, 2014).

These commissions and committees have collectively shaped the evolving landscape of media regulation in India. They have addressed various challenges, from traditional print media issues to the complexities introduced by digital and convergent media (Thakurta, 2012) [25]. While not all recommendations have been implemented, these bodies have played a crucial role in framing the discourse around media freedom, responsibility, and regulation in post-independence India.

Key Recommendations and Resulting Policies
A. **Press Council of India:** One of the most significant outcomes of the First Press Commission was the recommendation to establish the Press Council of India (PCI). The PCI was eventually set up in 1966 through the Press Council Act of 1965, with the dual objective of preserving the freedom of the press and maintaining and improving the standards of newspapers and news agencies (Press Council of India, 2021).

The PCI serves as a quasi-judicial body, acting as a moral watchdog for the press. It investigates complaints against and by the press for violation of ethics or freedom (Kumar, 2015) [9]. However, its effectiveness has been debated, with critics arguing that it lacks teeth due to its inability to enforce its decisions (Thakurta, 2012) [25].

The Second Press Commission recommended expanding the PCI's scope to include electronic media, leading to debates about creating a broader Media Council. Although this recommendation wasn't fully implemented, it influenced later discussions on media regulation in the digital age (Second Press Commission, 1982).

B. **Ownership and Cross-Media Holdings:** Both Press Commissions addressed the issue of media ownership

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concentration. The First Commission warned against monopolistic tendencies in the press, recommending measures to prevent concentration of ownership (Press Commission of India, 1954). This led to the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act of 1969, which included provisions related to the press (Guha Thakurta, 2011) [5].

The Second Commission went further, recommending restrictions on cross-media ownership to prevent the formation of media monopolies (Second Press Commission, 1982). While these recommendations weren't fully implemented, they influenced later policy discussions.

In 2008 and 2014, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) made recommendations on media ownership, suggesting restrictions on cross-media holdings and advocating for transparency in ownership structures (TRAI, 2014). However, comprehensive legislation on media ownership remains a contentious issue.

C. **Working Conditions for Journalists:** Improving the working conditions of journalists was a key focus of both Press Commissions. The First Commission's recommendations led to the Working Journalists Act of 1955, which provided for the regulation of conditions of service of working journalists and other newspaper employees (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 1955).

The Act mandated the formation of Wage Boards to determine fair wages for journalists and non-journalist newspaper employees. Several Wage Boards have been constituted since, with the most recent Majithia Wage Board recommendations being accepted by the Supreme Court in 2014 (Press Information Bureau, 2014).

Despite these measures, challenges persist in implementing fair working conditions, particularly in the context of contractual employment and the gig economy in digital media (Saeed, 2020) [22].

D. **Freedom of Press vs. Government Control:** Balancing press freedom with government control has been a recurring theme in India's media policy discourse. The Press Commissions emphasized the importance of press freedom while also recognizing the need for responsible journalism.

The First Press Commission stated that freedom of the press is essential for the proper functioning of a democratic society, but it also emphasized the press's social responsibility (Press Commission of India, 1954). This dual emphasis has shaped subsequent policy discussions.

Various legislative measures have been introduced over the years to regulate the press, often sparking debates about press freedom. These include:

i). The Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867 (amended multiple times)
ii). The Official Secrets Act, 1923
iii). Defamation laws (both civil and criminal)
iv). The Information Technology Act, 2000 (and its amendments)

The tension between press freedom and government control came to the fore during the Emergency (1975-77), leading to increased emphasis on safeguarding press freedom in subsequent years (Raghavan, 1994) [18].

More recently, debates have centered around internet shutdowns, regulation of digital news media, and the use of sedition laws against journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). The evolving nature of media and technology continues to present new challenges in striking the right balance between freedom and regulation.

Impact on the Indian Media Landscape
A. Changes in Media Ownership Patterns

The recommendations of the Press Commissions have significantly influenced media ownership patterns in India, albeit with mixed results. While efforts were made to prevent monopolistic tendencies, the media landscape has witnessed a trend towards concentration of ownership, particularly in regional markets (Thakurta & Reddy, 2010) [26].

The emergence of large media conglomerates has been a notable development, with companies diversifying across print, television, and digital platforms. This trend has raised concerns about the potential impact on editorial independence and diversity of viewpoints (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2012) [13].

Despite recommendations for transparency in ownership, cross-media holdings remain a contentious issue. The TRAI's recommendations in 2014 for restrictions on cross-media ownership have yet to be fully implemented, leaving room for debate on the best approach to ensure a diverse media ecosystem (TRAI, 2014).

B. Professionalization of Journalism

The Press Commissions' emphasis on improving working conditions and professional standards has contributed to the gradual professionalization of journalism in India. The implementation of the Working Journalists Act and subsequent Wage Board recommendations have helped establish journalism as a recognized profession with defined rights and responsibilities (Rao, 2009) [19].

The establishment of journalism schools and departments in universities, partly influenced by the Commissions' recommendations, has led to a more structured approach to journalism education. This has contributed to raising professional standards and ethical awareness among journalists (Kumar, 2015) [9].

However, challenges persist, particularly in the digital age. The rise of citizen journalism, social media, and digital-only news platforms has blurred the lines between professional and amateur journalism, presenting new challenges for maintaining professional standards (Belair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2018) [2].

C. Press Freedom and Government Relations

The relationship between the press and the government in India has been shaped by the principles laid out in the Press Commission reports, which emphasized both press freedom and social responsibility. While India generally maintains a free press, there have been periodic tensions between media and government (Reporters without Borders, 2021).

The Press Council of India, established on the recommendation of the First Press Commission, has played a role in mediating these tensions. However, its effectiveness in protecting press freedom has been questioned, particularly during times of political pressure (Thakurta, 2012) [25].

The digital age has brought new dimensions to the press freedom debate. Issues such as internet shutdowns, regulation of digital news media, and the application of sedition laws to online content have emerged as contentious points in media-government relations (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2020).

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Despite challenges, the foundation laid by the Press Commissions has contributed to a relatively robust and diverse media landscape in India. The ongoing debates about press freedom, regulation, and the role of media in democracy reflect the continuing relevance of the issues first addressed by these commissions (Jeffrey, 2015) [8].

Evolving Role of Press Commissions
A. Adaptation to Changing Media Scenarios
The role of Press Commissions in India has evolved significantly since the establishment of the First Press Commission in 1952. While the initial focus was primarily on print media, subsequent commissions and committees have had to adapt to the rapidly changing media landscape (Kumar, 2015) [9].

The Second Press Commission (1978-1982) began to address the emergence of electronic media, recognizing the growing influence of television and radio (Second Press Commission, 1982). However, the pace of technological change has outstripped the ability of traditional commission structures to keep up, leading to a shift towards more agile regulatory bodies and ad-hoc committees (Thakurta, 2012) [25].

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has taken on an increasingly important role in media regulation, particularly in areas where telecommunications and media converge. TRAI's recommendations on issues such as cross-media ownership and digitalization have become crucial in shaping media policies (TRAI, 2014).

B. Addressing Challenges of Digital Media
The digital revolution has presented unprecedented challenges to media regulation, forcing a reconsideration of the role and structure of bodies like Press Commissions. Key issues include:

i). **Regulation of Online News Portals:** The government has introduced new rules for digital media platforms, raising questions about the balance between regulation and press freedom (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021).
ii). **Fake News and Misinformation:** The rapid spread of misinformation online has led to calls for new regulatory frameworks, challenging traditional concepts of press regulation (Agrawal *et al*., 2018) [1].
iii). **Data Privacy and Digital Rights:** Issues of data collection, user privacy, and digital rights have become central to media policy discussions (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2020).
iv). **Platform Regulation:** The growing influence of social media platforms in news dissemination has raised questions about their role and responsibilities (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019) [17].

While no new Press Commission has been appointed to specifically address these digital challenges, various committees and regulatory bodies have taken on aspects of this role. For instance, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has highlighted the need for updated regulatory frameworks that protect press freedom in the digital age (CPJ, 2020).

The evolving media landscape suggests a need for more flexible and responsive regulatory mechanisms. Future approaches may involve a combination of self-regulation, co-regulation, and statutory regulation, adapting the spirit of the Press Commissions to the realities of the digital era (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2012) [13].

Critiques and Limitations
A. Implementation Challenges
The recommendations of Press Commissions in India have faced significant implementation challenges, limiting their effectiveness in shaping media policies:
i). **Political Resistance:** Successive governments have been selective in implementing recommendations, often avoiding those that might curtail their influence over media (Thakurta, 2012) [25].
ii). **Industry Pushback:** Media owners have resisted recommendations that affect their financial interests, such as those related to working conditions and cross-media ownership (Guha Thakurta, 2011) [5].
iii). **Enforcement Issues:** The Press Council of India, established on the recommendation of the First Press Commission, lacks punitive powers, reducing its effectiveness in enforcing ethical standards (Press Council of India, 2021).
iv). **Slow Adaptation:** The time lag between commission reports and policy implementation often renders recommendations outdated in a rapidly evolving media landscape (Kumar, 2015) [9].

B. Relevance in the Current Media Landscape
The relevance of traditional Press Commissions in the current media ecosystem has been questioned due to several factors:
i). **Digital Transformation:** The rise of digital and social media has created new challenges that the commission structure, designed primarily for print media, struggles to address (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2012) [13].
ii). **Convergence of Media:** The blurring lines between different forms of media (print, broadcast, digital) make it difficult for sector-specific commissions to provide comprehensive recommendations (TRAI, 2014).
iii). **Global Nature of Media:** The increasing influence of global tech giants and transnational media corporations poses challenges that are beyond the scope of national-level commissions (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019) [17].
iv). **Speed of Change:** The lengthy process of forming commissions, conducting studies, and producing reports is often too slow to keep pace with rapid technological and market changes (Saeed, 2020) [22].
v). **Shift towards Regulatory Bodies:** There has been a move towards more permanent regulatory bodies like TRAI, which can respond more quickly to emerging issues than ad-hoc commissions (TRAI, 2014).

Despite these limitations, the principles established by Press Commissions continue to inform media policy debates. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for more agile, responsive, and technologically aware mechanisms to address the complex challenges of the modern media landscape (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2020).

Conclusion
This research has examined the pivotal role of Press Commissions in shaping media policies in post-independence India. From the First Press Commission's foundational work to the Second Commission's attempts to address evolving challenges, these bodies have significantly influenced the Indian media landscape. Key outcomes include the establishment of the Press Council of India, the Working Journalists Act, and ongoing debates on media ownership and press freedom.

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Despite implementation challenges and critiques, the principles established by Press Commissions continue to inform media policy discussions in India. Their emphasis on press freedom, journalistic ethics, and the media's social responsibility remains relevant. However, the traditional commission structure has struggled to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital media ecosystem (Kumar, 2015) [9].

The future of media policy-making in India is likely to involve a more dynamic and multi-faceted approach:

i). **Adaptive Regulation:** There is a need for more flexible regulatory mechanisms that can respond quickly to technological changes and emerging challenges (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2012) [13].

ii). **Multi-stakeholder Approach:** Future policy-making may involve greater collaboration between government, industry, civil society, and tech companies (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2020).

iii). **Focus on Digital Challenges:** Addressing issues like misinformation, data privacy, and platform regulation will be crucial (Agrawal *et al.*, 2018) [1].

iv). **Global Cooperation:** Given the transnational nature of digital media, international cooperation in policy-making will become increasingly important (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019) [17].

v). **Balancing Act:** The ongoing challenge will be to balance press freedom with responsible journalism in the digital age (Reporters without Borders, 2021).

While the era of large-scale Press Commissions may be over, their legacy continues to shape the discourse on media policy in India. The future will require innovative approaches that build on this foundation while adapting to the unique challenges of the digital media landscape.

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