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Organizational Publicity and Media Relations: A Public Administration Perspective on Government-Media Interface

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Abstract:
Governments speak not just by means of policy, but also by the way they manage their relationship with the press on a day-to-day basis. This paper explores the concept of publicity and media relations in government with a public administration lens and looks at the relationship between the Indian state and the news media. It is written in a qualitative and documentary style, and is based on regulatory and watchdog information, scholarship up to 2023, judicial rulings, institutional records, and statutory instruments. It is an analysis of the institutional structure of government communication, such as the Press Information Bureau, the Central Bureau of Communication, Prasar Bharati, state information and public relations departments, etc., and the categorisation of the instruments of publicity used. Despite the decline in India's rank from 136th to 161st in the World Press Freedom Index from 2017 to 2023, there are also more than 148,000 registered publications and 881 million internet subscribers in the country, according to secondary data. The paper suggests that the interface is closest to a constant negotiation between informing the public, as it is to serve public interest, and opinion shaping, as it is to propaganda. It sets out to establish four pillars of statutory transparency, professional communication standards, regulated government advertising and media literacy, which it proposes will help to ensure that media publicity remains accountable to democratic principles in a digital media age.

Keywords: organizational publicity; media relations; government communication; public administration; press freedom; transparency; Right to Information; India.

1. Introduction

All public organisations, whether they want to or not, communicate. An organization that produces a press note, a district collector who informs the media about a flood, and a health department that conducts a vaccination drive are all in the business of organizational publicity: the deliberate management of information flowing from an organization to its publics. In modern states, this activity does not even belong to the incidental part of administration. It is now a role of governance in its own right, with professionals who receive public funding and operate by rules (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Garnett, 1992).

News media are at the heart of this activity. At the same time, they are a medium of the administration's communication with citizens, a monitor by which the administration is held to account, and a forum for the debate on policy (Habermas, 1989; Schudson, 2002). Public administration is thus caught between a rock and a hard place in the media. The official must educate the press on programmes, get compliance, and gain trust. The press is important to citizens because they must find out what officials have done, and what they have failed to do. Both these needs meet in the government-media interface, and a frictionless space is uncommon.

The intensity of the interface is unique to India. The country has one of the largest and most linguistically rich media systems, with newspapers and periodicals numbering 146,045 in 2021–22 (Press Registrar General of India [PRGI], 2022), and Reporters Without Borders has counted 380 television news channels (2023). The telecom regulator recorded 881.25 million internet subscribers by March 2023 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2023). At the same time, the state is itself a major media actor: it runs a public broadcaster, a national information bureau, an advertising and outreach agency, and a network of state-level information and public relations departments. Constitutionally, Article 19(1)(a) guarantees freedom of speech and expression, which the Supreme Court has read to include freedom of the press and the citizen's right to receive information (*Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras*, 1950; *Secretary, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting v. Cricket Association of Bengal*, 1995). The Right to Information Act, 2005 was enacted with a statutory right of access to official records.

1.1 Problem Statement

Government communication research in India has generally been studied either from the perspective of media studies or political communication rather than an administrative perspective (Thomas, 2010; Rodrigues & Ranganathan, 2015). Public administration poses other questions: how communication is organised, resourced, controlled and held to account within public bureaucracies. This paper embraces the latter perspective. It has questions about how organs of government do publicity and relations with the media, what rules govern the relationship, and where publicity becomes propaganda and where the press becomes dependent upon the source.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The paper aims to explain the meaning of organizational publicity and of media relations in the context of public administration (a); to sketch the institutional and legal framework of the relationship between the government and the media (b); to categorize the instruments of publicity and analyse the recent changes in the shape of the media (c); and to identify areas of accountability deficiencies and recommend reforms (d). These aims lead to the following research questions.

• RQ1. What are the ways in which public organisations in India organise publicity and media relations?
• RQ2. Are there legal and institutional protections for the interface?
• RQ3. How far do the current arrangements support the state's responsibility to inform, when the press has the freedom to scrutinise?

1.3 Significance and Structure

With communication now taking place online, the questions have grown more pressing. Social media can enable departments to communicate directly with citizens without the press in between, and social media has also expanded the reach of misinformation and made the information environment more highly contested (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Mergel, 2013). In response, the State has introduced new laws, like the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which have added new issues of state control of speech.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, the conceptualization and literature review are provided. The method is described in Section 3. The institutional architecture is explored in Sections 4 to 6, as is the instruments of publicity and the media environment, with the aid of tables and figures. Section 7 brings the issue of publicity and accountability into a comparative perspective, Section 8 presents challenges and recommendations, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Publicity, Public Relations and Media Relations

Government communication has a loose vocabulary, which means precision is needed. Publicity: the intentional spreading of information to gain attention & influence perception. Public relations is the broader management aspect that establishes and cultivates connections between a company and the populations it has to deal with (Cutlip et al., 2006). Media relations is the component of that function that deals with journalists and editors: providing information, answering questions, and controlling the organization's presence in the news media. These functions, in government, are generally referred to as government communication or public sector communication because the sponsor is a public authority using public funds for a public purpose (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Lee et al., 2012).

The four models of Grunig and Hunt (1984) continue to be a valuable classification of practice: press agentry or publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical communication. The first two are more typical characteristics of government offices, from which favorable messages are sent or neutral facts distributed; the dialogic modes, which treat citizens as partners, are less typical. Liu and Horsley (2007) introduce a second perspective on decision, which indicates that government communicators consider legal constraints, political orientation, and media environment when deciding on communication.

2.2 Theoretical Lenses

The interface is surrounded by four bodies of theory. Research on agenda setting indicates that the public may view the issues that are emphasized by the media as important or not; framing research indicates that the framing of an issue affects interpretation and response (Entman, 1993). In these terms, publicity is an instance of the government's attempt to shape the agenda and the frame. Second, the public sphere that Habermas (1989) has devised provides the normative standard to which the media should aspire: citizens should have the opportunity to critically examine power by engaging in rational debate, not simply receive official messages. Third, the mediatization thesis is that political and administrative institutions gradually become more media-logical in their action (Strömbäck, 2008). Fourth, there are concerns within the field of critical studies regarding the limits of news as it becomes more restricted in its scope due to the influence of elites and the state; this is evident in the propaganda

model, as well as in works on public relations and democracy (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Moloney, 2006).

A second set of lenses is added to administrative theory. As part of the New Public Management, public institutions adopted marketing and branding methods from the private sector, and used the language of 'customers' to refer to the citizens whom they served (Hood, 1991). The New Public Service critique suggests that administrators should provide services to citizens instead as collaborators in government, and facilitate communication that fosters dialogue and trust (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). As the two fields tie in, transparency scholarship is about disclosure being useful to its target audience (Fung et al., 2007), openness in government communication is about being open, accurate, and timely (Fairbanks et al., 2007), and openness requires institutional vision and citizen voice (Meijer et al., 2012). Roberts (2006) warns that these factors of secrecy and selective disclosure remain central to the nature of a bureaucracy in the presence of transparency laws.

2.3 Indian and Digital-Era Scholarship.

The development of the media system that the government now must deal with has been well recorded in India's scholarship. Chatterji (1987) has traced the long history of the subordination of broadcasting to official control. Jeffrey (2000) and Ninan (2007) demonstrated how capitalism and the development of regional-language publishing have produced new, local publics. Mehta (2008) traced the changes caused by the introduction of satellite news media, and Thussu (2007) found such change in the process of global shift towards infotainment. Thomas (2010) and Rodrigues and Ranganathan (2015) examined the political economy of communications and the shift from the news media to the role of a participant. All of which echoes the classic case for the developmental role of a free press as postulated by Sen (1999), that a press that can bring the failures to light provides an incentive for responsive government. The practice of public relations in Asia is influenced by more than just a single Western approach, as is shown by work in this area (Sriramesh, 2004; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009).

A new stream has been added with digital communication. Mergel (2013) explained the federal agencies in the USA's approaches to adopting social media, using push, pull, and networking strategies; Bryer and Zavattaro (2011) explored implications for public administration theory; and the OECD's primer noted that the use of social media by governments creates policy coherence, capacity, and trust issues (Mickoleit, 2014). Research on crisis communication places great emphasis on the importance of the timely, honest delivery of information to safeguard reputation (Coombs, 2007). Comparative survey data, including from Reuters Institute's Digital News Report, documents the trend towards online and social consumption of news (Newman et al., 2023).

2.4 Gap and Analytical Framework

There is a lot in the literature on media systems and on communication practice but little on the administrative organisation of publicity in India. This paper thus adopts a three-layered approach. The first level is architecture: the agencies, statutes and judicial doctrines which organize the interface. The other is instruments – the means by which publicity is achieved. The third is accountability: the protections that ensure transparency of the press and transparency of public information. The next 4 layers (4-7) follow this pattern.

3. Methodology

The study is of type qualitative and documentary is designed for institutional analysis. The four categories of material were studied. The first is the legal and policy documents like the Constitution of India, the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867, the Press Council Act, 1978, the Prasar Bharati Act, 1990, the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995, the Right to Information Act, 2005 and the Information Technology Rules, 2021. The second is a judgment that sets boundaries on press freedom and government advertising. The third is the statistical and watchdog data from the Registrar of Newspapers for India (now Press Registrar General of India), the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India and Reporters Without Borders. The fourth is book-length peer-reviewed research in the field of public administration, public relations and media studies.

There are three steps to the analysis. The coding of legal and institutional sources was done using a three-level system of architecture, instruments, and accountability. Qualitative indicators were created into descriptive tables and figures that indicated the direction and scale of change and were not used to test hypotheses. Finally, the Indian arrangements were compared with the selected democracies to find out the missing or weak safeguards in the Indian system.

There are restrictions on the design. It uses secondary and official information, and does not necessarily include interviews with official representatives or reporters, meaning that it is not able to report on decision-making in real life regarding communication. Press freedom indices are based on expert opinion and measurable indicators, and are disputed by governments. The figures reported are the latest available in 2023 and are published.

4. Government Media Relations in India: Major Challenges and the Way Forward

The Indian interface is based on three sets of institutions as shown in Table 1. The first group is the government's own communicators. The Press Information Bureau (PIB), under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, is the nodal agency for explaining policies, programmes and achievements to the media through releases, briefings, accreditation of journalists and, since 2019, a fact-checking unit. Advertising and outreach, once the work of the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity, now sits with the Central Bureau of Communication, which was formed in 2017 by merging earlier publicity units. Ministries, departments and state Information and Public Relations departments, including those of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, run parallel machinery for their own schemes.

The second group is state-owned media. All India Radio and Doordarshan were long run as departments of government (Chatterji, 1987). The Prasar Bharati Act, 1990 created a statutory corporation to give public broadcasting autonomy, and it became operational in 1997. Autonomy has nevertheless remained partial because of financial dependence and government appointments. The Supreme Court's holding that airwaves are public property to be used for the advancement of free speech and plurality set the normative standard against which such arrangements are judged (*Secretary, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting v. Cricket Association of Bengal*, 1995).

The third group covers the regulators and accountability mechanisms. The Press Council of India, established under the Press Council Act, 1978, hears grievances and issues censures for violations of the norms of Journalism. The publications are registered by the Registrar of Newspapers and statements are prepared annually according to the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867 annually. Public authorities are obligated to disclose information proactively under the Right to Information Act, 2005,

and the citizens have a right to seek it out (with some exemptions). The Information Technology Rules, 2021, laid down a code of ethics and grievance mechanism for digital news publishers. But the courts have also been involved: in Common Cause v. Union of India (2015), the Supreme Court gave guidelines to the Government on "restricting" the displaying of photographs and "partisan" content in government advertisements of political functionaries.

Table 1

Institutions and Instruments Shaping the Indian Government-Media Interface

Institution or instrument	Legal or administrative basis	Role in the interface
Press Information Bureau	Ministry of Information and Broadcasting	Releases, briefings, journalist accreditation, fact-check unit (since 2019)
Central Bureau of Communication	Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (formed 2017)	Government advertising, outreach and field publicity
State I&PR departments	State governments	Scheme publicity, empanelment of media, state accreditation
Prasar Bharati	Prasar Bharati Act, 1990	Public broadcasting through All India Radio and Doordarshan
Press Council of India	Press Council Act, 1978	Adjudicates complaints, upholds press standards
Registrar of Newspapers	Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867	Registers publications, publishes *Press in India*
Information Commissions	Right to Information Act, 2005	Enforce disclosure by public authorities
Digital Media Ethics Code	IT Rules, 2021	Grievance redress and oversight of digital news publishers
Judiciary	Article 19(1)(a), Article 32	Defines limits on speech, airwaves and government advertising

Note. Compiled by the author from the statutes and official sources listed in the References.

5. Instruments and Practices of Organizational Publicity

Government bodies have a recurring toolkit of instruments which are grouped in Table 2 according to purpose and according to the risk associated with each instrument. There are three clusters to comment on.

Access to and supply of information. The basic elements of media relations are press notes, briefings and interviews. Timeliness, accuracy and equal access are key to their value for journalists. Accreditation systems introduce a level of gatekeeping: they enable reporters to get to official sources, but if reporters must obtain accreditation for favourable treatment of their reporting, they become a tool for leverage. Most of the activity is public information, as would be expected, and occasionally lapses into press agency. As one would expect, most of this is public information, although there are some lapses into “press agency”.

Paid & owned media. Government advertising is used to inform citizens of their entitlements, deadlines, public-health measures, and also a source of revenue for many publications. The same funds that go into making campaigns work can also be used to incentivize the media they like and to stifle the outlets they dislike – that's why the Supreme Court's rules in Common Cause v Union of India (2015) aimed to differentiate between public information and political self-promotion. Public broadcasting and field publicity reach audiences that commercial broadcast struggles to reach, such as rural and tribal communities.

Digital and crisis communication. Departments have their own social media accounts and the platforms for citizen engagement, allowing them to directly connect with the public. Many Indian offices are still in the first phase of "pushing messages," as Mergel (2013) described it; agencies rarely spend as much effort attracting citizens to their message as they do pushing it. We have seen the benefit of this model in the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure it is under. Official bulletins and press briefings were provided on a daily basis, providing a basis for facts, but there was a great deal of rumour that had to be fact-checked and quickly corrected. In a crisis, Coombs (2007) states that the reputation of an organisation should be safeguarded through timely, accurate and consistent information, which is also a characteristic of good public administration.

Table 2

Instruments of Organizational Publicity in Government and Associated Risks

Instrument	Main purpose	Typical risk
Press releases and briefings	Explain decisions and programmes	Selective or promotional framing
Journalist accreditation	Provide access to officials and venues	Access used as leverage
Government advertising	Notify, educate and mobilise	Political self-promotion; financial pressure on media
Public broadcasting and field publicity	Reach remote and low-literacy audiences	Editorial dependence on government
Social media and citizen platforms	Direct, two-way contact with citizens	Bypassing the press; amplification of one-sided messages
Fact-checking and rebuttal	Correct misinformation quickly	Government defining what counts as false
Crisis communication	Maintain trust and compliance	Withholding or delaying adverse information

Note. Classification developed by the author from the literature reviewed in Section 2.

6. Trends in Media Consumption and Government Communication

The scope and form of the Indian media frame the impact of government communication. Table 3 and Figure 1 summarise the latest official data available in 2023.

Three features stand out. First, the print sector is vast but fragmented. Registered publications rose from 144,520 in 2021 to 148,363 in 2023 and are registered in 189 languages and dialects (PRGI, 2022). As Figure 1 shows, however, dailies form only a small fraction of the register. Weeklies and periodicals of

other frequencies, many of them local and in regional languages, make up the rest. A department that wants to reach citizens in Andhra Pradesh or Telangana cannot rely on a few national dailies. It must operate in a chaotic press where money is thin and precious, and thus the value of advertising and official information is greater as well as more likely to be coercive.

Secondly, connectivity has altered citizens' news consumption. As per a TRAI report in March 2023, a huge population can be reached directly by mobile platforms, with 881.25 million Internet subscribers and 846.57 million broadband subscribers (TRAI, 2023). The survey also shows a significant shift towards online and social news sources, though the Reuters Institute survey sample is limited to English-speaking online users and should not be interpreted as being representative of the general population of the Indian nation (Newman et al., 2023). There is an element of streamlining the government's reliance on the press as an intermediary and, consequently, the press's role as a filter and critic, in the direct digital channels.

Third, just because you reach does not mean that you are trusted. These changes have unfolded alongside a decline in India's standing in international assessments of press freedom, taken up in Section 7.

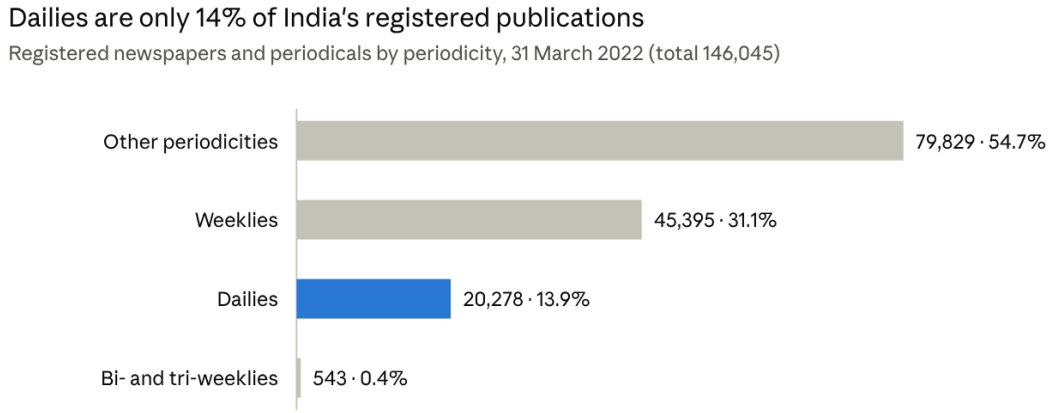
Table 3- *Selected Indicators of the Indian Media and Connectivity Landscape, 2021-2023*

Indicator	Value	Reference date	Source
Registered newspapers and periodicals	144,520	31 March 2021	PRGI (2022)
Registered newspapers and periodicals	146,045	31 March 2022	PRGI (2022)
Registered newspapers and periodicals	148,363	31 March 2023	Lok Sabha (2023)
Internet subscribers	881.25 million	March 2023	TRAI (2023)
Broadband subscribers	846.57 million	March 2023	TRAI (2023)
Total telephone subscribers	1,172.34 million	March 2023	TRAI (2023)
Overall teledensity	84.51%	March 2023	TRAI (2023)

Note. PRGI = Press Registrar General of India; TRAI = Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. Telecom figures are as published for the January-March 2023 quarter.

Figure 1

Composition of Registered Newspapers and Periodicals in India by Periodicity, 2021-22



The data is from the Press Registrar General of India, Press 2021–22, counts as of 31 March 2022, and shares computed from the counts.

Note. Data from Press in India 2021-22 (PRGI, 2022). The percentages were calculated by the author.

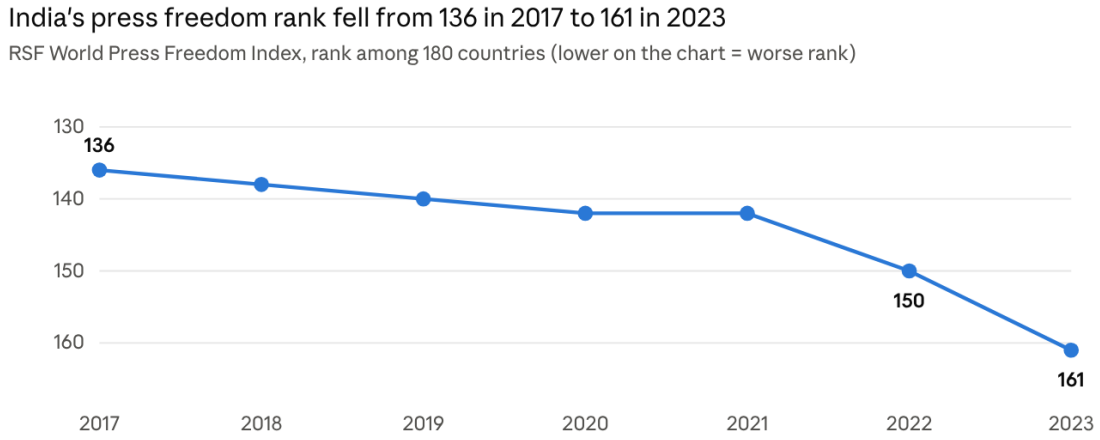
7. Discussion: Publicity, Accountability and the Limits of the Interface

The evidence suggests that it is a structural tension that has led to this failure, not a single failure. There is a legitimate and necessary need for government to be public: citizens cannot claim benefits they are not aware of, and public health and disaster response, as well as elections, rely on clear government messages. The same tools are available to flatter, too! When messages are used for a party or office-holder rather than for the public, when access to officials or advertising revenue is dependent upon coverage, or when access to advertising revenue is turned over to the state to declare what is true, the line between public information and propaganda is crossed (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Moloney, 2006).

Foreign tests indicate that the line is under tension. India has dropped from 136th position in 2017 to 161st in 2023 in the Reporters Without Borders index, and from 41 to 36.62 in its score from 2022 to 2023 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). There are arguments against using index methods, and rankings should not be interpreted as definitive. Despite this, the trends are aligned with gaps identified in Section 4: the limited role of the Press Council in terms of enforcement, limitations on the right to information and appeal backlogs, and a right to information regime in which government-designated bodies have a part to play in assessing news content. The proposed content restrictions on social media in the draft IT Rules, 2023, which aimed to remove any content that has been flagged as fake by a fact-checking organisation authorised by the government, highlight the dilemma (MoEIT, 2023). Addressing inaccuracies is a valid objective, but it is uneasy to coexist with press freedom in a country where the state is a subject of the news and also the standard for its veracity.

Figure 2

India's Rank in the World Press Freedom Index, 2017-2023



RSF World Press Freedom Index, 2017–2023 editions; rank among 180 countries

Note. Data from Reporters Without Borders (2023) and earlier editions of the index.

Comparative practice (summarised in Table 4) indicates that democracies deal with the tension between will and law and professional norms (Roberts, 2006; Sanders & Canel, 2013). The problem with the Indian gap is not disclosure legislation; it's enforceable rules for government communicators and independent monitoring of the use of publicity.

Table 4

Selected Safeguards in the Government-Media Interface: Comparative View

Country	Disclosure law	Principal safeguard for the press-state interface
India	Right to Information Act, 2005	Judicial guidelines on government advertising (2015); advisory Press Council
United Kingdom	Freedom of Information Act 2000	Civil Service Code of honesty and impartiality; professional standards in the Government Communication Service
United States	Freedom of Information Act, 1966	Statutory bar on using appropriated funds for "publicity or propaganda", reviewed by the Government Accountability Office
Sweden	Freedom of the Press Act, 1766	Constitutional protection for officials who give information to the press

Note. Compiled by the author from Roberts (2006), Sanders and Canel (2013) and national legislation.

8. Challenges and Policy Recommendations

There are five challenges that arise throughout the analysis. The autonomy of public broadcasting is limited. Discretion can be applied when it comes to advertising and accreditation, and that can be a lever against a financially weak press. Exemptions and a slow appeals process are two ways of eroding

transparency in law. Digital platforms enable direct messaging by the state, and they also have a larger surface for spreading misinformation, necessitating regulation that could be too broad. Lastly, most of the government's communication is still unidirectional, and there is very little professional training in dialogue (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Liu & Horsley, 2007).

These challenges are addressed in the following four-part framework.

1. **Statutory transparency.** Improve proactive disclosure provisions of Section 4 of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005; make appointments to Information Commissions timely; provide consolidated and periodic statements of the expenditure on media and advertisements by departments. The goal of disclosure is to make it usable, not voluminous (Fung et al., 2007).
2. **Professional standards for communicators.** Adopt a code of conduct for government communication that commits officers to accuracy, non-partisanship and equal access for journalists, and train information officers in public information and two-way dialogue (Fairbanks et al., 2007; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019).
3. **Regulated advertising and accreditation.** Adopt clear standards for empanelling media and accrediting journalists and extend Common Cause v. Union of India (2015) to state governments – subject ad expenditure to independent audit.
4. **Media literacy and independent verification.** Invest in media and information literacy, and support fact-checking by independent, multi-stakeholder bodies and strengthened self-regulation, so that the government is not the sole judge of accuracy.

These measures share a principle drawn from the New Public Service perspective: publicity is legitimate to the extent that it serves citizens' capacity to participate in governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000).

9. Conclusion

This paper has examined organizational publicity and media relations as a matter of public administration. In answer to the first research question, Indian public organizations manage publicity through a layered architecture: information bureaus and outreach agencies, ministry and state departments, and a public broadcaster, supplemented by a growing digital presence (Tables 1 and 2). In response to the second, the safeguards include legislation, regulation, and judicial interpretation and precedent, such as the Right to Information Act, the Press Council, and the Supreme Court rulings on the airwaves and government advertising. With the third, the equilibrium of informing and asking questions is being tested. The press is large and fragmented (Table 3, Figure 1); citizens are far easier to reach than ever before without the press; and internationally, it seems that the press's standing is declining in terms of press freedom (Figure 2).

The main thesis is the idea that publicity is not necessarily evil or good. The rules that govern it are necessary to its legitimacy of it as a necessary function of democratic administration. The four-part model of statutory transparency, professional standards, regulated advertising and accreditation, and media literacy with independent verification provides a means to maintain that legitimacy while maintaining the state's communication abilities.

The scope of the study suggests further research. Information officers and journalists would be interviewed to demonstrate the practice of communication decision-making. Through content analysis of press releases and advertisements, one can check to what extent publicity is informational or

promotional. Comparative studies of states' departments, e.g., between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, would show the differences in interface in a federal system. As communication continues to go online, that evidence will be key to holding government and media accountable to citizens for whom they are meant to serve.

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