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# Changing Nature of Television News Debates in India: Viewers' Perceptions of the Shift from Informative Discussions to Aggressive Presentations

(An Empirical Study of Prime-Time News Audiences in Delhi-NCR)

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## 1. Introduction

Television remains the largest segment of India's entertainment and media economy, and within television news the evening debate has become a signature genre. Night after night, a panel of politicians, party spokespersons, commentators and "experts" is assembled around a single provocative question, moderated by an anchor who is often as much a protagonist as a facilitator. The genre is frequently defended as democratic, because it brings contending voices into one frame and makes public affairs accessible to millions of people. It is equally often criticised as noise, a performance of conflict rather than a process of deliberation.

The prominence of the debate show cannot be understood without the structural change that preceded it. Batabyal (2010) records that Doordarshan was the lone channel on Indian airwaves until the early 1990s and that news on state television was long closer to official communication than to independent reporting. Private channels then multiplied to around 360, and by the late 2000s India had close to 60 twenty-four-hour news channels, up from one in 1998. More than 100 million households owned television sets, yet audiences per channel were shrinking even as total viewership rose. In such a crowded market a debate programme is commercially attractive. It is cheap to produce relative to field reporting, it can be run every night on any topic, and it can be built around conflict, which is the most dependable generator of attention.

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This study asks how and why the Indian television news debate has moved from an informative discussion model towards an aggressive presentation model, and, above all, whether ordinary viewers recognize that movement and what they make of it. Two terms need defining. By informative discussion the study means a format in which topics are chosen for public relevance, panelists are selected for expertise or representativeness, disagreement is civil and evidence-based, and the viewer is expected to leave better informed. By aggressive presentation it means a format in which confrontation, interruption, accusation, dramatic framing and repetition are the primary means of holding attention, and in which entertainment value outweighs informational value. The two models are ideal types, not a strict historical sequence. Ravi (2013) notes that even India's public service media have been pulled towards revenue mobilisation, and Norris (2001) observes that the growth of commercial competition is among the most dramatic changes transforming broadcasting worldwide. The question is therefore one of dominant tendency and direction, not of a golden age abruptly replaced by a dark one.

Existing scholarship offers a persuasive explanation of why the shift occurs. Batabyal (2010) shows that roughly 70 per cent of news-channel revenue came from advertising, so ratings determined the price of airtime, and producers described the weekly ratings release as the moment that decided moods, careers and programme futures. The ratings sample was drawn from urban households and largely excluded rural India, while recruitment policy brought in journalists from the same affluent, urban background as the target audience. Ravi (2013) reaches a parallel conclusion at the system level, arguing that extreme commercialization and the race for television rating points have caused television to compromise ethical standards, and that existing codes and self-regulatory bodies have achieved meagre results. Read together, these studies suggest that confrontation is not an accident of personality but a rational strategy inside a particular political economy.

The consequences of that strategy are less settled. Studies of television journalism in Brazil and Colombia indicate that the time given to a subject and the rhetorical resources used to present it can impose a homogenized narrative and contribute to polarisation (Pérez & Romanini, 2022). Research on audiences watching a debate while commenting online finds that the second-screen conversation is dominated by sarcasm, gaffes and trivial details rather than the substance of the argument (Trilling, 2014). At the same time, multi-country evidence

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from 62 elections and 56 televised debates finds no significant effect of debates on vote choice (Le Pennec & Pons, 2022). Loud debates, in other words, may matter less for changing votes than for setting narratives, shaping the tone of public conversation and eroding trust. Whether Indian viewers experience them this way is an empirical question.

Much of the Indian evidence also comes from the newsroom side. Batabyal (2010) interviewed producers and managers in two private channels, Ravi (2013) offers a critical study of content and ethics, and Kumar, Kumar and Raj (2024) content-analysed prime-time debates on two channels over a fifteen-day sample. What remains thinly documented is the viewer's own perception: whether regular viewers believe debates have become more aggressive, whom they hold responsible, whether aggression lowers the credibility they grant to a channel, and whether they credit debates with shaping their understanding of issues more than their voting preference. Without this audience-side evidence, claims about polarisation and credibility remain assumptions, and the argument that the audience "wants" aggression, which producers routinely advance, remains untested.

The present study addresses that gap through a survey of 400 regular viewers of prime-time news debates in the Delhi National Capital Region. It measures perceived aggression, perceived drivers, perceived credibility and perceived influence through a structured questionnaire of twenty questions, and tests four hypotheses derived from the literature. The study contributes in three ways. First, it supplies viewer-based evidence on a phenomenon that has so far been described mainly through newsroom ethnography and content analysis. Second, it connects the Indian case to international findings on narrative, polarisation and campaign effects by testing whether perceived influence is stronger for issue awareness and framing than for voting. Third, it offers a basis for recommendations to broadcasters, regulators and media-literacy practitioners that rest on what audiences themselves report.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the political economy of Indian news, anchors and ethics, narrative and polarizations, second-screen audiences and the effects of televised debates. The objectives and hypotheses follow, and the methodology, sample size, area of study and sampling method are then described. Hypothesis testing is reported before a question-by-question analysis of the twenty items with graphical presentation and findings. The paper closes with conclusions, recommendations and limitations.

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## 2. Review of Literature

The literature reviewed below falls into eight strands. Each review states what the study examined, what it found and why it matters for the present investigation.

**Batabyal (2010): the imagined audience and the ratings logic.** Drawing on interviews in two private Indian news channels, Batabyal shows how corporate policy, ratings and recruitment translate market logic into editorial judgement. Roughly 70 per cent of revenue came from advertising, and producers described news as "what the consumer likes". The ratings sample was urban, largely excluded rural India and reserved a quarter of its meters for the highest socio-economic category, yet managers treated the numbers as a measure of editorial quality. Journalists recruited from the same affluent background imagined their own families as viewers. The study explains why quieter, evidence-heavy discussion is commercially fragile and why debates gravitate towards conflict. It is the main foundation for the present study's question on the role of the TRP system, although its data are from the late 2000s and come from producers rather than viewers.

**Ravi (2013): ethics and Indian television content.** Ravi frames Indian television content through political economy and a deontological reading of ethics, in which channel rules can displace accountability for social effects. He catalogues practices linked with the aggressive model: character assassination, unsubstantiated accusations about corruption, media trials, repeated telecast of the same material, invasion of privacy and the use of election symbols. He finds that the News Broadcasters Association, the Indian Broadcasting Foundation and the Broadcast Content Complaints Council have achieved meagre results, that codes remain "top-down", and that political ownership of channels weakens fairness. He recommends comprehensive self-regulation by trained professionals rather than heavy-handed state control. The study supports the questionnaire items on regulation, ownership and credibility.

**Kumar, Kumar and Raj (2024): anchors' bias and channel credibility.** This recent study examines news anchors' bias in prime-time debates and its effect on the credibility of television news channels. In a content analysis of Times Now and ABP News debates, political topics dominated, accounting for 60 per cent of topics on Times Now and 40 per cent on ABP News, and anchors' stance was pro-government in 67 per cent and 55 per cent of cases respectively. The authors describe anchors as gatekeepers who select and frame stories and as performers who must keep viewers engaged, and they argue that visible bias in tone and perspective affects

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how credible viewers consider a channel. The study rests on two channels, a fifteen-day sample and two interviews, so its findings are indicative. It provides the direct basis for testing the relationship between perceived aggression and credibility.

**Comparative work on public and private broadcasting: Norris (2001), Kumar (2021), Asano, Tago and Tanaka (2021) and Khorana (2013).** Norris argues that commercial competition is transforming broadcasting worldwide and asks whether public television can still entertain, inform and educate. Asano and colleagues examine how audiences in Japan react to pro-government bias in public and private media, suggesting that ownership shapes content and audience reaction although the direction of bias depends on context. Kumar compares prime-time shows of public and private news channels in India, and Khorana shows how NDTV's debate-style programme *The Big Fight* brought topics such as love, sex and marriage into a format that middle-class viewers considered "forward". Together these strands indicate that the debate format is a site where commercial and public-service logics collide, and they motivate the question on which type of channel viewers consider more aggressive.

**Pérez and Romanini (2022): television and political narratives.** Studying the coverage of former presidents' trials in Brazil and Colombia, the authors show that the time given to a subject and the rhetorical resources used in presenting it reveal an intention to thematise public debate, dominate its repercussion in other media and impose a homogenised narrative. The result, they argue, contributes to polarisation and hate speech. The study draws on agenda-setting and framing theory, which expect that emphasised topics become salient and that selected aspects of an issue are made prominent to promote a particular interpretation. Debate shows operate through the same mechanisms with the added intensity of live confrontation, which is why the present study asks viewers whether debates raise their awareness of issues, shape their framing and increase polarisation.

**Trilling (2014), Anstead and O'Loughlin (2011) and Hinz, Hill and Kim (2014): the second screen.** Trilling analysed more than 120,000 tweets on a German chancellor debate and found that tweets focused less on the candidates' own topics than on hosts, gaffes and a politician's necklace, with negative or humorous content dominating. Anstead and O'Loughlin found a direct link between the number of tweets and events on screen during a contentious episode of the BBC's *Question Time*. Hinz and colleagues show that popular television competes for attention with other online activity. Collectively the studies suggest that a

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broadcast now has a parallel online life and that formats optimised for attention are likely to feed a negative, sarcastic online stream. The questionnaire therefore asks viewers about the online reaction they see.

**Le Pennec and Pons (2022): do debates change votes?** Using surveys around 62 elections and an event study of 56 televised debates in seven countries, the authors found no significant effect of debates on individual vote-choice consistency or on aggregate vote intentions, with debates accounting for no more than about 3 per cent of the increase in consistency over the final campaign weeks. None of the countries studied is India and the debates were formal election events, so the results cannot be transferred directly to nightly Indian studio debates. They nonetheless justify the study's fourth objective, which compares perceived influence on awareness and framing with perceived influence on voting. If debates change votes little, any influence of loud debates probably lies in agenda setting, framing and the tone of public conversation, which is where Pérez and Romanini (2022) and Trilling (2014) locate television's power.

**Nadaf (2022), Graubart (1989) and Kamber (1993): bias, international norms and political stages.** Nadaf shows, in a study of television coverage of COVID-19, how news bias attached responsibility for the pandemic to marginalised minorities, particularly Muslims, indicating that the costs of aggressive, ratings-oriented news fall unevenly. Graubart reminds readers that criticism of news media, including accusations of bias, shallow coverage and ethnocentrism, is a long-standing international debate. Kamber argued early in the 1990s that television had become the principal conduit of information and that political actors were learning to exploit it by avoiding the traditional press filter and choosing friendly formats. The argument explains why parties value the debate studio as a high-visibility platform and why partisan panels are common.

**Research gap.** The reviewed studies converge on an account in which commercialisation, ratings, imagined audiences and weak regulation produce aggressive debates, and in which aggression may shape narratives and online talk more than votes. Yet the Indian evidence is mostly newsroom-centred or content-based, rests on data from the late 2000s and early 2010s or on two channels, and rarely asks viewers directly. No reviewed study measures, within one audience sample, how far viewers perceive a shift towards aggression, which drivers they

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blame, how aggression relates to the credibility they grant, and whether perceived influence differs between awareness and voting. The present study is designed to fill that gap.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

The study pursues the following four objectives:

1. To examine how regular viewers in Delhi-NCR perceive the shift of prime-time television news debates from informative discussion towards aggressive presentation.
2. To identify the factors that viewers hold responsible for the aggressive style of debates, namely the TRP race, advertising revenue, political or ownership pressure and the personal style of anchors.
3. To assess the relationship between the perceived aggressiveness of debates and the perceived credibility of the channels that air them.
4. To compare the perceived influence of debates on issue awareness and framing with their perceived influence on voting preference.4. Null and Alternative Hypotheses

One pair of hypotheses is framed for each objective. All tests are two-tailed at the 5 per cent level of significance, although the literature leads to a directional expectation, stated in the table.

**Table 1: Null and alternative hypotheses**

| Objective | Null hypothesis (H0) | Alternative hypothesis (H1) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | H01: The mean Perceived Aggression Index of viewers does not differ from the neutral midpoint of the scale ($\mu = 3$). | H11: The mean Perceived Aggression Index differs from the neutral midpoint ($\mu \neq 3$); viewers are expected to score above 3. |
| 2 | H02: Respondents are equally distributed across the four factors held responsible for aggressive debates (TRP race, advertising revenue, political or ownership pressure, anchors' personal style). | H12: Respondents are not equally distributed across the four factors; the TRP race is expected to be named most often. |
| 3 | H03: There is no significant relationship between the Perceived Aggression Index and the Perceived Credibility Index ($\rho = 0$). | H13: There is a significant relationship between the two indices ($\rho \neq 0$); the relationship is expected to be negative. |
| 4 | H04: Perceived influence of debates on issue awareness and framing does not differ from their perceived influence on voting preference ($\mu d = 0$). | H14: Perceived influence on issue awareness and framing differs from perceived influence on voting preference ($\mu d \neq 0$); the former is expected to be higher. |

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## 5. Research Methodology

### 5.1 Research design

The study uses a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach. Viewers' perceptions are measured at a single point in time through a structured questionnaire, and inferential tests are applied to the indices constructed from it. The design suits the objectives because each calls for a measure of what viewers believe, not for an inference about what broadcasts contain.

### 5.2 Sources of data

Primary data were collected from respondents through a self-administered questionnaire available in English and Hindi. Secondary data in the form of scholarly articles and working papers on Indian television news, media ethics, narrative and polarisation, second-screen audiences and televised debates informed the construction of the questionnaire and the hypotheses. Data collection took place in 2026 July.

### 5.3 Research instrument

The questionnaire contains twenty closed-ended questions. Fourteen are statements rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) and six are single-choice

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questions. Demographic details (gender, age group, education and place of residence) were recorded separately. Table 2 shows how the questions are organised.

**Table 2: Structure of the questionnaire**

| Block | Questions | Measures | Format |
|---|---|---|---|
| A. Viewing behaviour | Q1–Q2 | Frequency of viewing; main reason for watching | Single choice |
| B. Perceived shift and aggression | Q3–Q7 | Aggressiveness, interruption, anchor partisanship, controversy-led topics, partisan panels | Likert |
| C. Informational value | Q8 | Usefulness of information gained | Likert |
| D. Perceived drivers and regulation | Q9–Q12 | Main driver; TRP system; type of channel; weak regulation | Q9, Q11 single choice; Q10, Q12 Likert |
| E. Credibility | Q13–Q14 | Trust in channel; trust in debate information | Likert |
| F. Perceived effects | Q15–Q19 | Polarisation; awareness; framing; voting; online reaction | Q19 single choice; others Likert |
| G. Preferred format | Q20 | Preferred debate format | Single choice |

### 5.4 Constructs and indices

Three composite indices were constructed from the Likert items. The Perceived Aggression Index is the mean of Q3 to Q7. The Perceived Credibility Index is the mean of Q8, Q14 and the reverse-coded Q13, so that a higher score means higher credibility. The Issue Awareness and Framing Index is the mean of Q16 and Q17. Each index ranges from 1 to 5. Perceived influence on voting is measured by Q18 alone.

### 5.5 Reliability

Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha. The value was 0.80 for the five-item Perceived Aggression Index and 0.69 for the three-item Perceived Credibility Index. The first is good for exploratory research, and the second is marginally below the conventional 0.70 threshold, which is not unusual for a three-item scale.

### 5.6 Tools of analysis

Responses were analysed with frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. The four hypotheses were tested with a one-sample t-test (H01), a chi-square goodness-of-fit test (H02), Pearson's product-moment correlation, checked against Spearman's rank correlation

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(H03), and a paired-samples t-test (H04). Effect sizes (Cohen's d, Cramér's V and $r^2$) are reported with each test. The analysis was run in Python with the SciPy library, and the level of significance is 0.05.

## 6. Sample Size

The sample size was determined with Cochran's (1977) formula for an unknown or very large population, $n = z^2pq / e^2$. At a 95 per cent confidence level ($z = 1.96$), maximum variability ($p = 0.5$, $q = 0.5$) and a margin of error of 5 per cent ($e = 0.05$), the formula gives $n = (1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 / (0.05)^2 = 384.16$, which rounds up to 385. The target was set at 400 respondents to allow for incomplete questionnaires, and all 400 responses were retained for analysis. Table 3 gives the profile of the sample.

**Table 3: Demographic profile of respondents (N = 400)**

| Variable | Category | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 226 | 56.5 |
| | Female | 174 | 43.5 |
| Age group | 18-25 years | 128 | 32.0 |
| | 26-35 years | 112 | 28.0 |
| | 36-45 years | 80 | 20.0 |
| | 46-60 years | 56 | 14.0 |
| | Above 60 years | 24 | 6.0 |
| Education | Up to senior secondary | 52 | 13.0 |
| | Graduate | 188 | 47.0 |
| | Postgraduate | 128 | 32.0 |
| | Doctorate / professional | 32 | 8.0 |
| **Total** | | **400** | **100.0** |

## 7. Area of Study

The study area is the Delhi National Capital Region (Delhi-NCR), covered through five sub-regions: Delhi, Noida and Greater Noida, Ghaziabad, Gurugram and Faridabad. The region was chosen for three reasons. It is the political centre of the country and the setting for much of the public affairs that prime-time debates discuss. It has a large, mixed Hindi- and English-

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speaking viewing population with access to a wide range of public and private news channels. And it is accessible to the researcher for direct questionnaire administration.

The choice also carries a limit that should be stated plainly. Batabyal (2010) showed that television ratings are drawn mainly from urban households, so an urban sample is precisely the audience that the ratings system already privileges. Findings from Delhi-NCR therefore speak for urban viewers and cannot be generalised to rural India. Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents across the sub-regions.

**Table 4: Distribution of respondents by sub-region**

| Sub-region | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Delhi | 120 | 30.0 |
| Noida / Greater Noida | 80 | 20.0 |
| Ghaziabad | 70 | 17.5 |
| Gurugram | 70 | 17.5 |
| Faridabad | 60 | 15.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

## 8. Sampling Method

The study used a multi-stage, non-probability sampling procedure. A sampling frame of all prime-time news viewers does not exist, so a probability sample was not feasible.

- **Stage 1: purposive selection of areas.** The five Delhi-NCR sub-regions listed above were selected purposively to cover the capital and its main neighbouring urban centres.
- **Stage 2: quota allocation.** A quota of respondents was fixed for each sub-region, and within each sub-region quotas were set by gender and age group so that the sample included men and women and viewers from all age bands.
- **Stage 3: screening.** Only adults aged 18 and above who had watched at least one prime-time news debate in the previous month were eligible, so that every respondent had direct exposure to the format.
- **Stage 4: selection of respondents.** Within each quota cell, eligible respondents were approached through residential neighbourhoods, colleges and workplaces and were invited to complete the questionnaire in English or Hindi.

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Because selection within quotas was by convenience, the sample is not statistically representative of the population, and the tests in the next section should be read as evidence about this sample, with caution about generalisation.

## 9. Hypothesis Testing

Each hypothesis was tested at the 5 per cent level of significance (two-tailed). Table 5 summarises the results and the paragraphs that follow explain each decision.

**Table 5: Summary of hypothesis tests**

| Hypothesis | Test applied | Test statistic | Significance | Effect size | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| H01 | One-sample t-test | $t(399) = 26.49$ | $p < 0.001$ | $d = 1.32$ | Rejected |
| H02 | Chi-square goodness of fit | $\chi^2(3) = 41.60$ | $p < 0.001$ | $V = 0.19$ | Rejected |
| H03 | Pearson correlation | $r(398) = -0.73$ | $p < 0.001$ | $r^2 = 0.54$ | Rejected |
| H04 | Paired-samples t-test | $t(399) = 24.35$ | $p < 0.001$ | $d = 1.22$ | Rejected |

### 9.1 Hypothesis 1: perceived aggression

The mean Perceived Aggression Index was 3.87 (SD = 0.66; 95% CI 3.80 to 3.93), against a neutral midpoint of 3. The one-sample t-test showed that the difference is statistically significant, $t(399) = 26.49$, $p < 0.001$, with a very large effect ($d = 1.32$). In all, 87.3 per cent of respondents scored above the midpoint. The null hypothesis H01 is rejected: viewers perceive prime-time debates as significantly aggressive.

### 9.2 Hypothesis 2: factors held responsible

Expected frequencies under equal distribution were 100 per category. The observed counts were TRP / ratings race (152), Advertising revenue (96), Political / ownership pressure (88), Anchors' personal style (64). The chi-square test was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 400) = 41.60$, $p < 0.001$, with Cramér's $V = 0.19$, a small-to-moderate effect. The null hypothesis H02 is rejected. The TRP race was named well above its expected count and anchors' personal style well below it, so viewers do not attribute aggressive debates equally to all four factors. The test is omnibus and does not by itself show which pairs differ, so the direction is read from the observed counts.

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### 9.3 Hypothesis 3: aggression and credibility

The Perceived Credibility Index had a mean of 2.47 (SD = 0.70). Perceived aggression and perceived credibility were strongly and negatively correlated, $r(398) = -0.73$, $p < 0.001$, so that the aggression index explains about 54.0 per cent of the variance in credibility. Spearman's rank correlation gave a similar result ($\rho = -0.72$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis H03 is rejected: the more aggressive viewers consider debates, the lower the credibility they grant. Figure 1 shows the relationship. Correlation does not establish that aggression causes the loss of credibility.

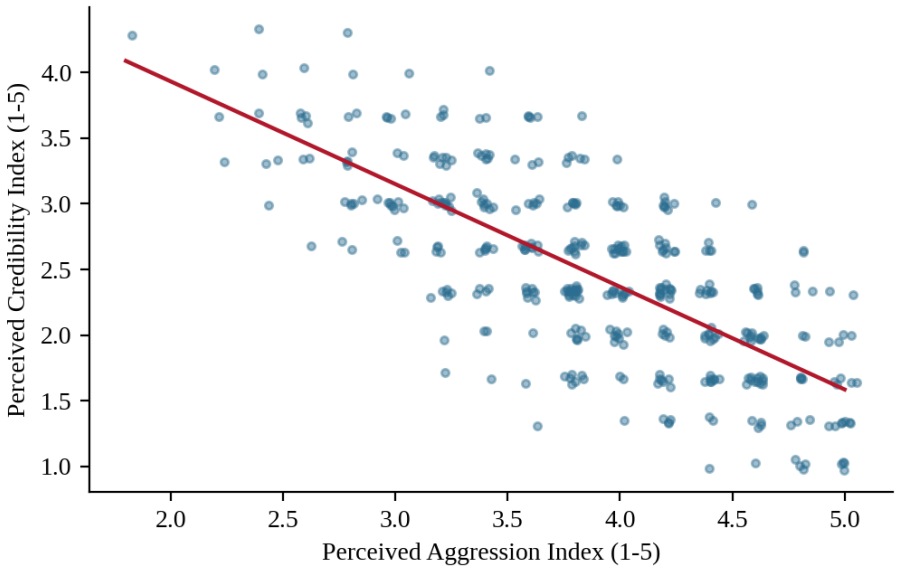



*Figure 1: Perceived aggression and perceived credibility (N = 400; points jittered slightly for visibility)*

### 9.4 Hypothesis 4: awareness and framing versus voting

Perceived influence on issue awareness and framing was high (M = 3.63, SD = 0.53), whereas perceived influence on voting preference was low (M = 2.55, SD = 0.72). The mean difference of 1.08 scale points was significant, $t(399) = 24.35$, $p < 0.001$, with a large effect ($d = 1.22$). The null hypothesis H04 is rejected. Viewers credit debates with shaping what they know and how they see issues far more than with deciding how they vote, a pattern in line with the direction of the international evidence (Le Pennec & Pons, 2022). Because these are self-reports, they measure perceived and not actual influence.

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## 10. Analysis of the Twenty Questions: Graphical Presentation and Findings

This section analyses each of the twenty questionnaire items. Each question is shown with its response distribution (N = 400), a chart and a finding. For the Likert items, “agree” combines Agree and Strongly agree, and “disagree” combines Disagree and Strongly disagree. Figure 2 gives an overview of the fourteen Likert items before the item-by-item analysis.

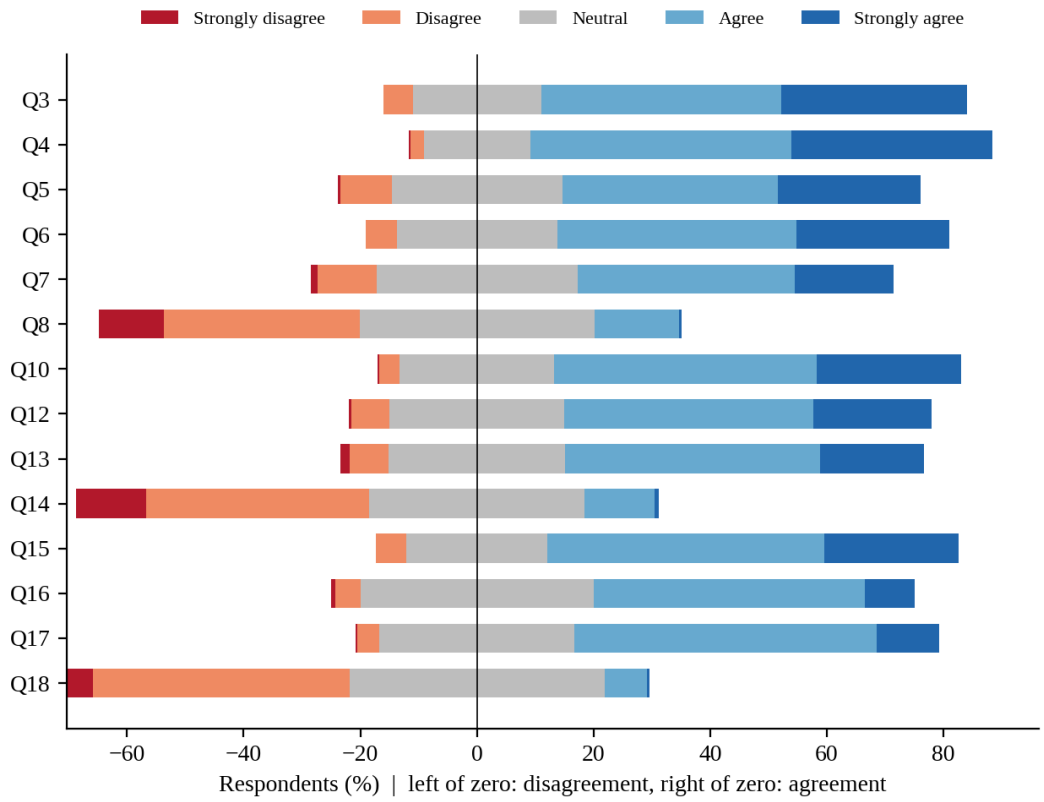



*Figure 2: Overview of responses to the fourteen Likert items (Q3–Q8, Q10, Q12–Q18)*

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**Table 6: Summary of Likert items (N = 400)**

| Q | Statement (abridged) | Mean | SD | Agree % | Disagree % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q3 | Debates more aggressive than a decade ago | 4.00 | 0.86 | 73.0 | 5.0 |
| Q4 | Panellists interrupt and shout | 4.11 | 0.79 | 79.3 | 2.5 |
| Q5 | Anchors take sides | 3.76 | 0.94 | 61.5 | 9.3 |
| Q6 | Topics chosen for controversy | 3.88 | 0.86 | 67.3 | 5.3 |
| Q7 | Partisan panels, few neutral experts | 3.59 | 0.93 | 54.3 | 11.3 |
| Q8 | Debates give useful information | 2.60 | 0.89 | 15.0 | 44.8 |
| Q10 | TRP pushes sensationalism | 3.90 | 0.82 | 69.8 | 3.8 |
| Q12 | Weak regulation allows aggression | 3.76 | 0.87 | 63.0 | 7.0 |
| Q13 | Aggression reduces trust in channel | 3.69 | 0.89 | 61.5 | 8.3 |
| Q14 | I trust debate information | 2.51 | 0.88 | 12.8 | 50.2 |
| Q15 | Debates increase polarisation | 3.88 | 0.82 | 70.5 | 5.3 |
| Q16 | Debates raise my awareness | 3.58 | 0.74 | 55.0 | 5.0 |
| Q17 | Debates shape how I frame issues | 3.69 | 0.72 | 62.5 | 4.0 |
| Q18 | Debates influence my vote | 2.55 | 0.72 | 7.8 | 48.5 |

### Q1. How often do you watch prime-time TV news debates?

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Daily | 96 | 24.0 |
| 3-5 times a week | 124 | 31.0 |
| 1-2 times a week | 112 | 28.0 |
| Less than weekly | 68 | 17.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

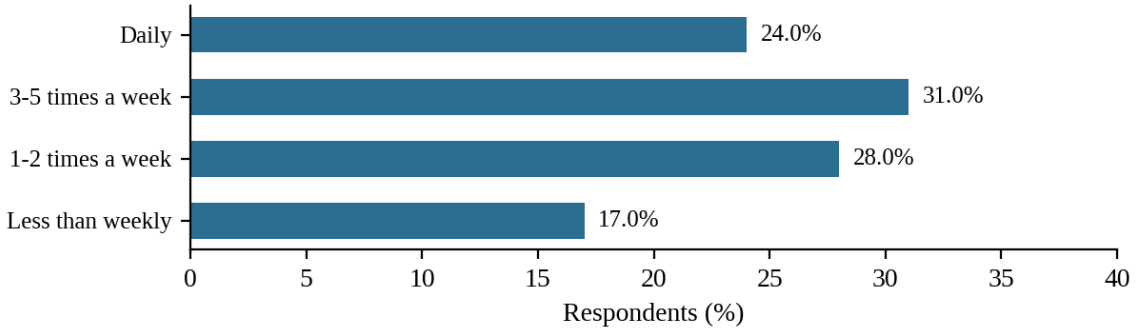



*Figure 3: Q1: How often do you watch prime-time TV news debates?*

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**Finding.** 55.0 per cent of respondents watch prime-time debates at least three times a week, including 24.0 per cent who watch daily, and only 17.0 per cent watch less than weekly. The sample is therefore made up largely of habitual viewers, whose perceptions in the questions below rest on sustained exposure to the format.

**Q2. What is your main reason for watching these debates?**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| To get informed about current affairs | 148 | 37.0 |
| For entertainment / drama | 76 | 19.0 |
| To follow my preferred party or leader | 84 | 21.0 |
| Habit / time-pass | 92 | 23.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

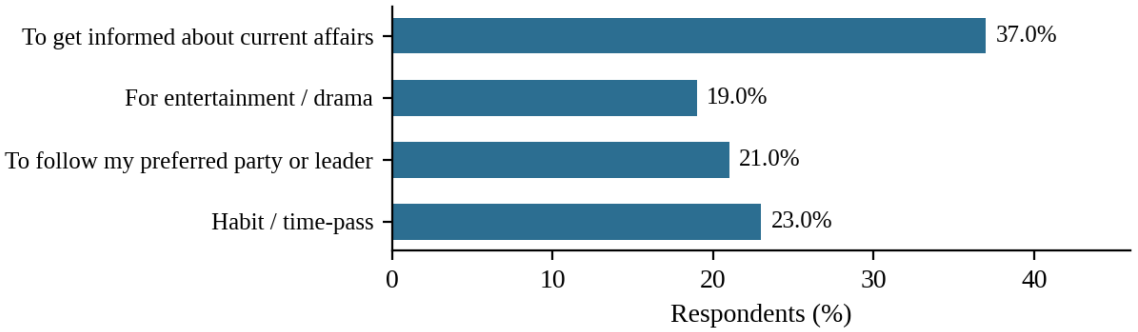



*Figure 4: Q2: What is your main reason for watching these debates?*

**Finding.** Getting informed is the largest single motive (37.0 per cent), yet the remaining 63.0 per cent watch for entertainment (19.0 per cent), to follow a preferred party or leader (21.0 per cent) or out of habit (23.0 per cent). The informational purpose that defines the informative discussion model is thus a minority motive. This partly supports the producers' claim that debates are consumed for spectacle and affiliation as well as information (Batabyal, 2010), and the party-following motive is the one that partisan panels serve (Kamber, 1993).

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**Q3. Compared with a decade ago, prime-time debates are now more aggressive and less informative.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 0 | 0.0 |
| Disagree | 20 | 5.0 |
| Neutral | 88 | 22.0 |
| Agree | 165 | 41.2 |
| Strongly agree | 127 | 31.8 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 4.00, SD = 0.86; agree = 73.0%, neutral = 22.0%, disagree = 5.0%.*

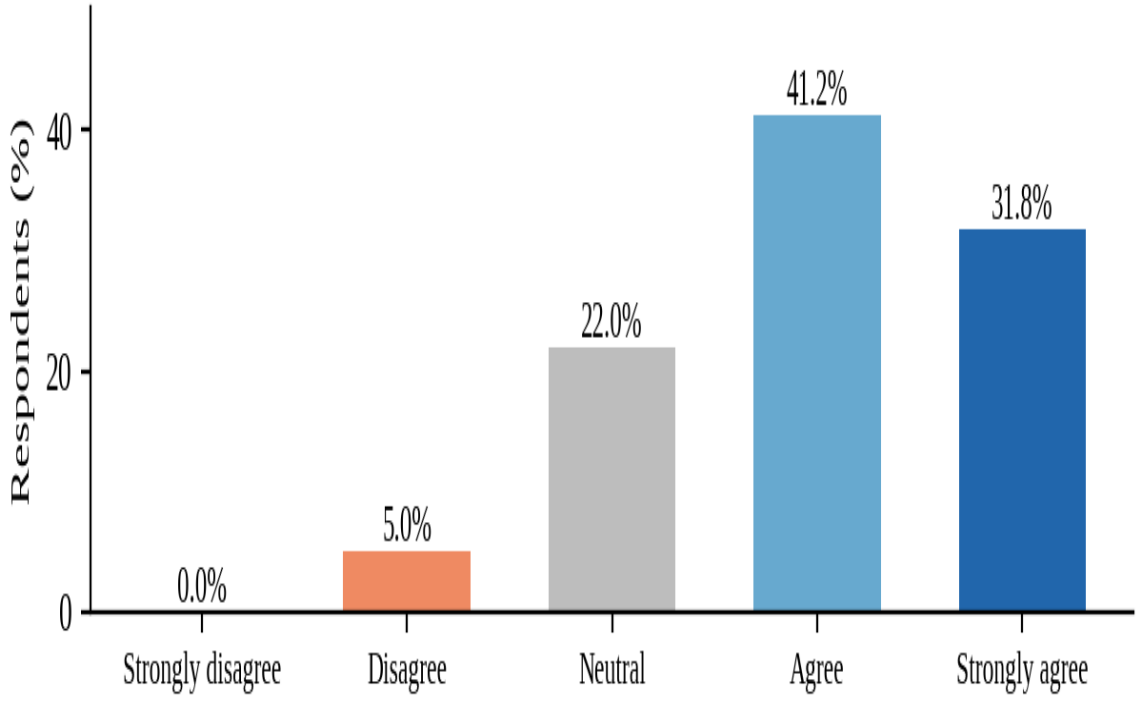



*Figure 5: Q3: Compared with a decade ago, prime-time debates are now more aggressive and le…*

**Finding.** 73.0 per cent agree that debates are now more aggressive and less informative than a decade ago, against only 5.0 per cent who disagree (mean = 4.00). Viewers overwhelmingly perceive the shift from informative discussion to aggressive presentation, which is the central premise of Objective 1. The item records perception, not measured change over time.

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**Q4. Panellists frequently interrupt and shout over each other.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 1 | 0.2 |
| Disagree | 9 | 2.2 |
| Neutral | 73 | 18.2 |
| Agree | 179 | 44.8 |
| Strongly agree | 138 | 34.5 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 4.11, SD = 0.79; agree = 79.3%, neutral = 18.3%, disagree = 2.5%.*

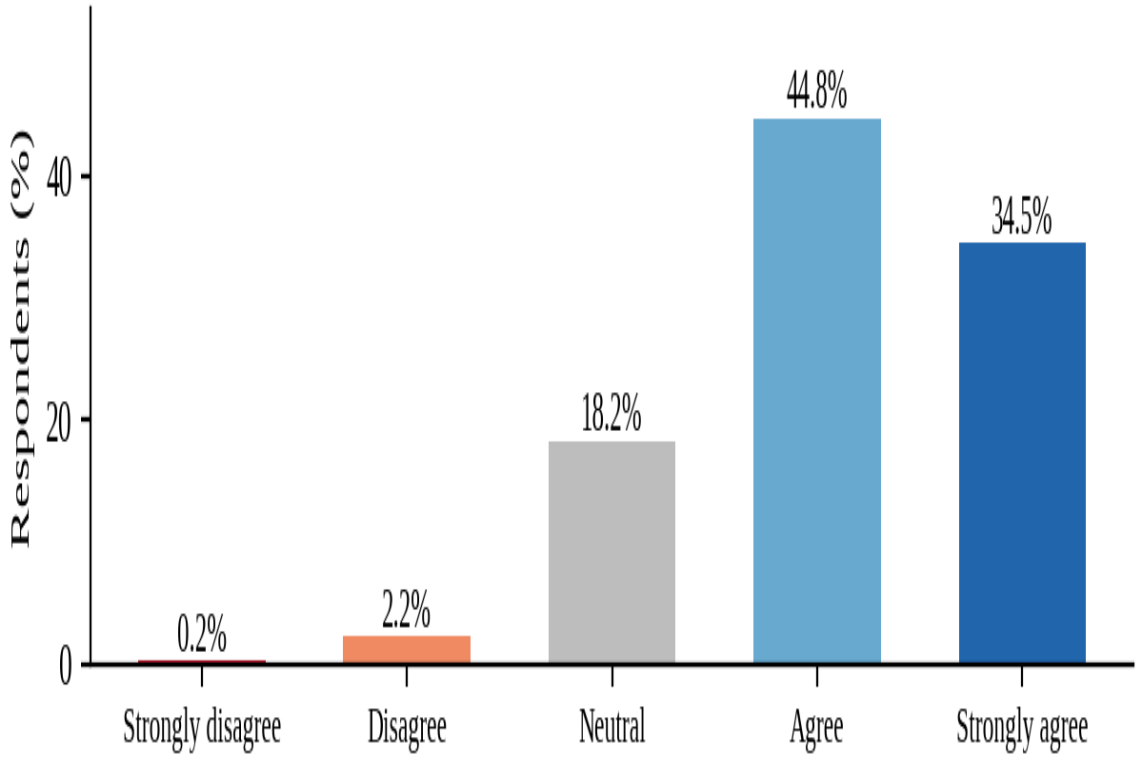



*Figure 6: Q4: Panellists frequently interrupt and shout over each other.*

**Finding.** Interruption and shouting is the most strongly endorsed marker of aggression, with 79.3 per cent agreeing and a mean of 4.11, the highest among the five aggression items. It is the most directly observable feature of the format and matches the practices catalogued by Ravi (2013).

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**Q5. Anchors often take sides instead of moderating neutrally.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 2 | 0.5 |
| Disagree | 35 | 8.8 |
| Neutral | 117 | 29.2 |
| Agree | 148 | 37.0 |
| Strongly agree | 98 | 24.5 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.94; agree = 61.5%, neutral = 29.3%, disagree = 9.3%.*

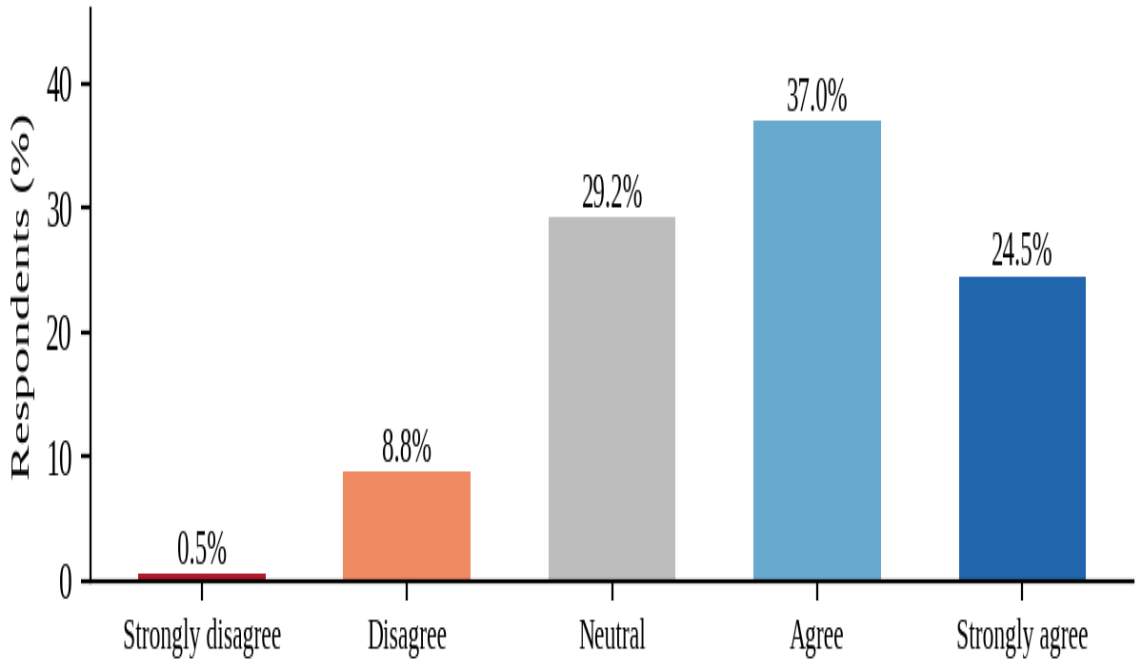



*Figure 7: Q5: Anchors often take sides instead of moderating neutrally.*

**Finding.** 61.5 per cent believe that anchors often take sides, and 9.3 per cent disagree. The perception is broadly consistent with the visible anchor bias that Kumar, Kumar and Raj (2024) documented in a content analysis, and it points to the blurring of moderation and advocacy that the literature describes.

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**Q6. Topics are chosen for controversy rather than public relevance.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 0 | 0.0 |
| Disagree | 21 | 5.2 |
| Neutral | 110 | 27.5 |
| Agree | 164 | 41.0 |
| Strongly agree | 105 | 26.2 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.86; agree = 67.3%, neutral = 27.5%, disagree = 5.3%.*

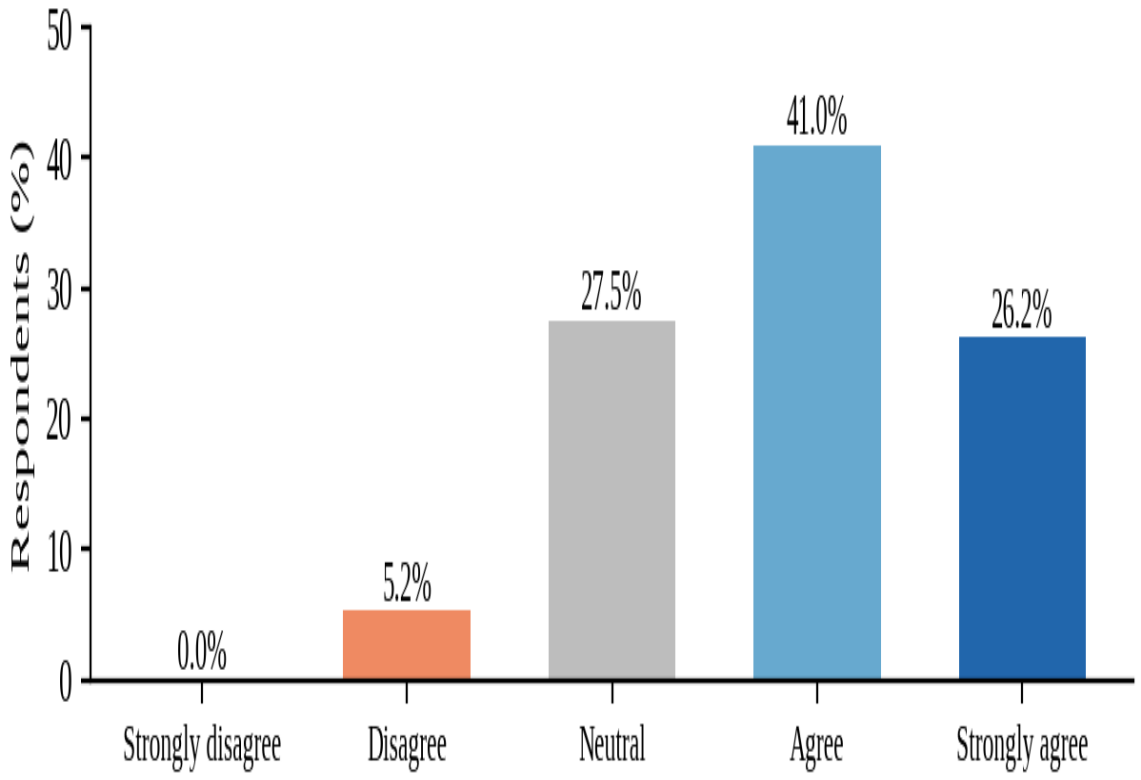



*Figure 8: Q6: Topics are chosen for controversy rather than public relevance.*

**Finding.** 67.3 per cent agree that topics are chosen for controversy rather than public relevance (mean = 3.88). Viewers' perception thus matches the conflict-first topic selection that Batabyal (2010) and Ravi (2013) identified from the production side.

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**Q7. Panels are built from opposed partisans; neutral experts rarely appear.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 5 | 1.2 |
| Disagree | 40 | 10.0 |
| Neutral | 138 | 34.5 |
| Agree | 149 | 37.2 |
| Strongly agree | 68 | 17.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.59, SD = 0.93; agree = 54.3%, neutral = 34.5%, disagree = 11.3%.*

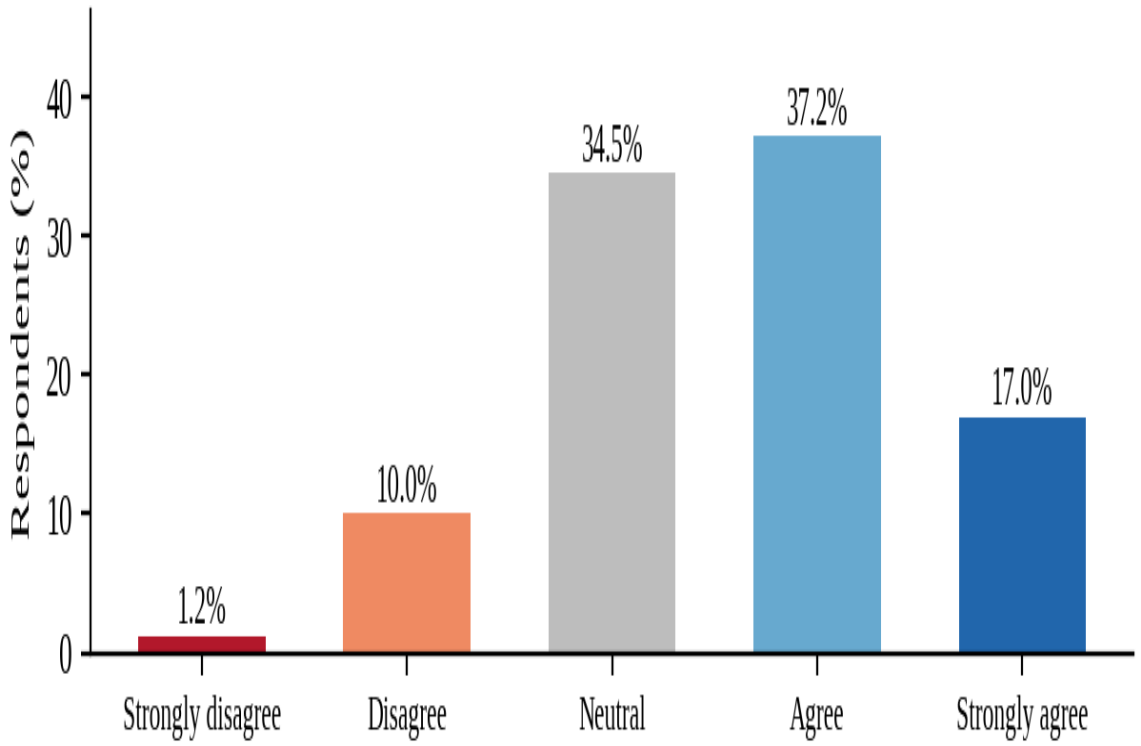



*Figure 9: Q7: Panels are built from opposed partisans; neutral experts rarely appear.*

**Finding.** 54.3 per cent agree that panels are built from opposed partisans with few neutral experts. This is the lowest agreement among the aggression items (mean = 3.59; 11.3 per cent disagree), possibly because panel composition is less easy to observe than shouting or interruption. A majority still perceive the partisan panel design that Ravi (2013) criticises.

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**Q8. I learn useful, reliable information from debates today.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 45 | 11.2 |
| Disagree | 134 | 33.5 |
| Neutral | 161 | 40.2 |
| Agree | 58 | 14.5 |
| Strongly agree | 2 | 0.5 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 2.60, SD = 0.89; agree = 15.0%, neutral = 40.3%, disagree = 44.8%.*

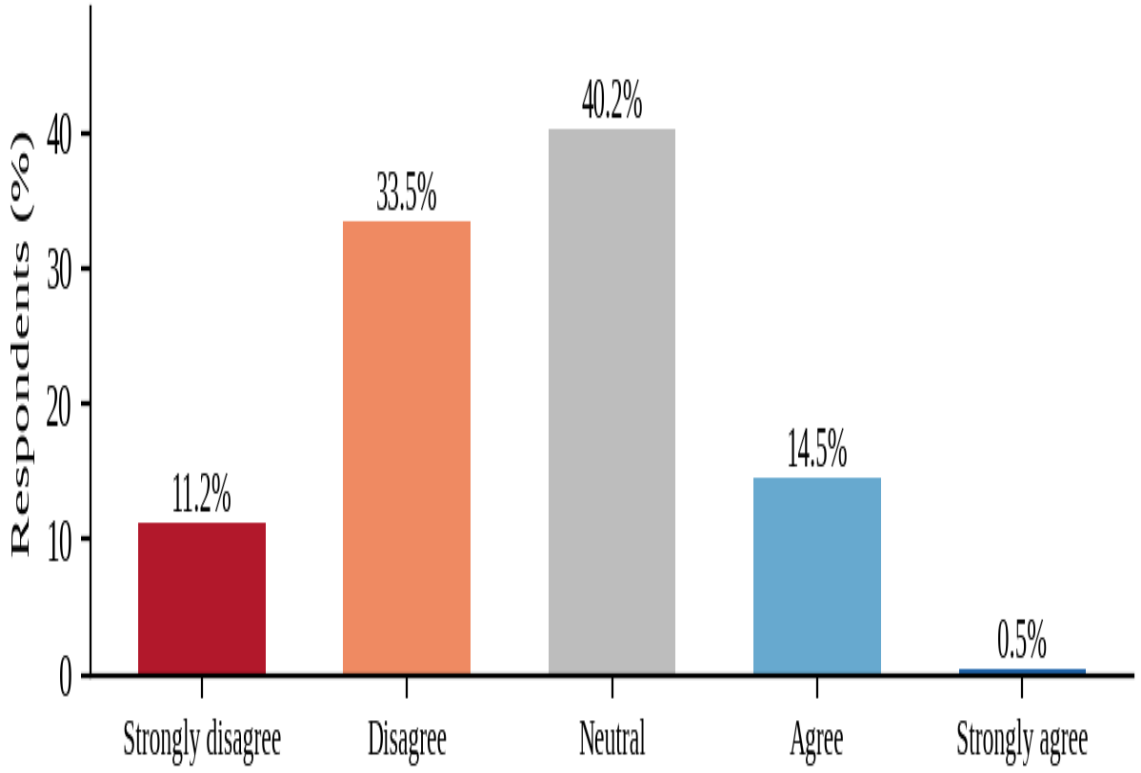



*Figure 10: Q8: I learn useful, reliable information from debates today.*

**Finding.** Only 15.0 per cent agree that they learn useful and reliable information from debates today, while 44.8 per cent disagree (mean = 2.60). The informational value that justifies the genre is weakly perceived, which supports the view that the format has moved away from informative discussion.

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**Q9. Which factor is mainly responsible for the aggressive style of debates?**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| TRP / ratings race | 152 | 38.0 |
| Advertising revenue | 96 | 24.0 |
| Political / ownership pressure | 88 | 22.0 |
| Anchors' personal style | 64 | 16.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

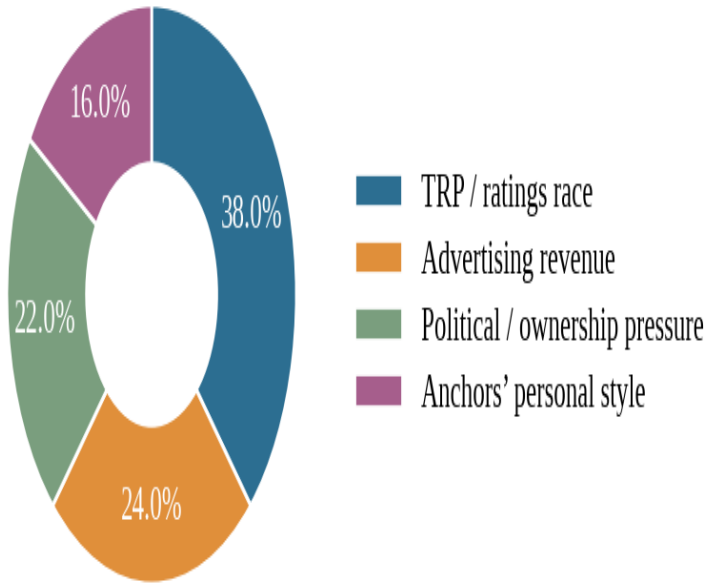



*Figure 11: Q9: Which factor is mainly responsible for the aggressive style of debates?*

**Finding.** The TRP race is named most often (38.0 per cent), followed by advertising revenue (24.0 per cent), political or ownership pressure (22.0 per cent) and anchors' personal style (16.0 per cent). 84.0 per cent point to structural pressures and only 16.0 per cent to individual anchors. Viewers' explanation thus resembles the political-economy reading of Batabyal (2010) and Ravi (2013). The unequal distribution is tested in Section 9.2.

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**Q10. The TRP system pushes channels towards sensational debates.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 1 | 0.2 |
| Disagree | 14 | 3.5 |
| Neutral | 106 | 26.5 |
| Agree | 180 | 45.0 |
| Strongly agree | 99 | 24.8 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.90, SD = 0.82; agree = 69.8%, neutral = 26.5%, disagree = 3.8%.*

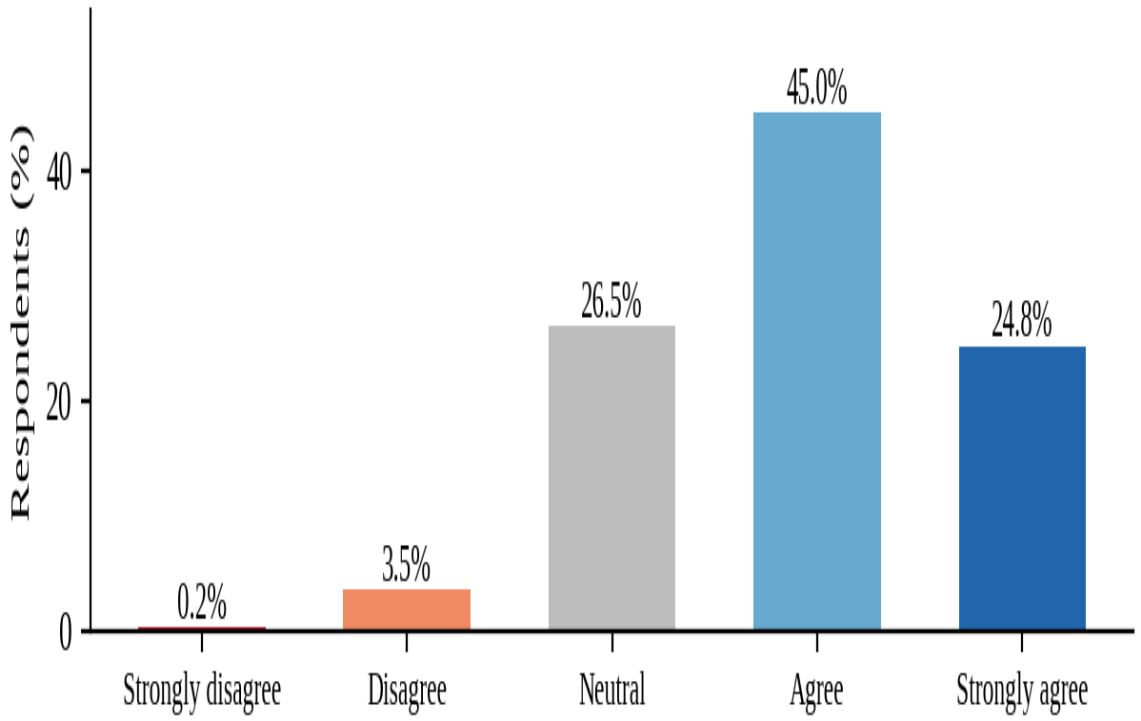



*Figure 12: Q10: The TRP system pushes channels towards sensational debates.*

**Finding.** 69.8 per cent agree that the TRP system pushes channels towards sensational debates and 3.8 per cent disagree (mean = 3.90). The result reinforces Q9 and indicates that viewers are aware of the ratings logic behind programming choices.

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**Q11. Which type of channel hosts the more aggressive debates?**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Private channels | 232 | 58.0 |
| Public (Doordarshan) | 20 | 5.0 |
| Both similar | 96 | 24.0 |
| Cannot say | 52 | 13.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

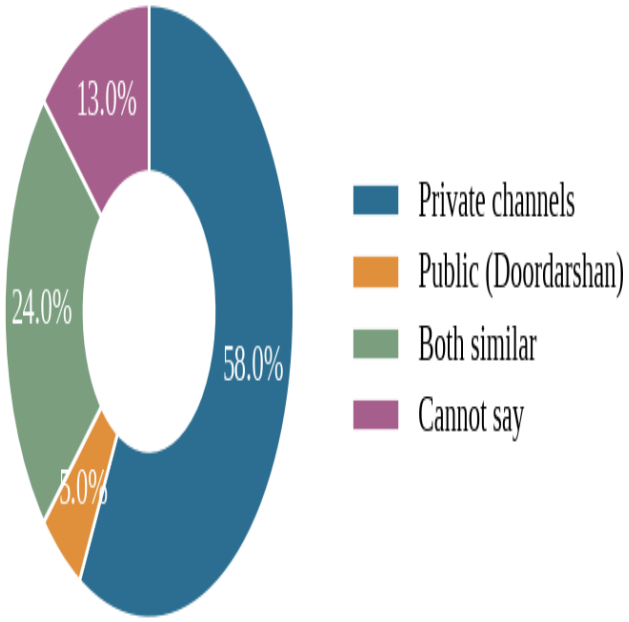



*Figure 13: Q11: Which type of channel hosts the more aggressive debates?*

**Finding.** 58.0 per cent consider private channels more aggressive, whereas only 5.0 per cent name public channels. A further 24.0 per cent see both as similar and 13.0 per cent cannot say. The majority view supports the private-public contrast in the literature (Kumar, 2021), while the group seeing no difference is consistent with Ravi's (2013) argument that revenue pressure and political dependence have affected public service media too.

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**Q12. Weak, mostly self-regulatory oversight allows aggressive debates to continue.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 2 | 0.5 |
| Disagree | 26 | 6.5 |
| Neutral | 120 | 30.0 |
| Agree | 171 | 42.8 |
| Strongly agree | 81 | 20.2 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.87; agree = 63.0%, neutral = 30.0%, disagree = 7.0%.*

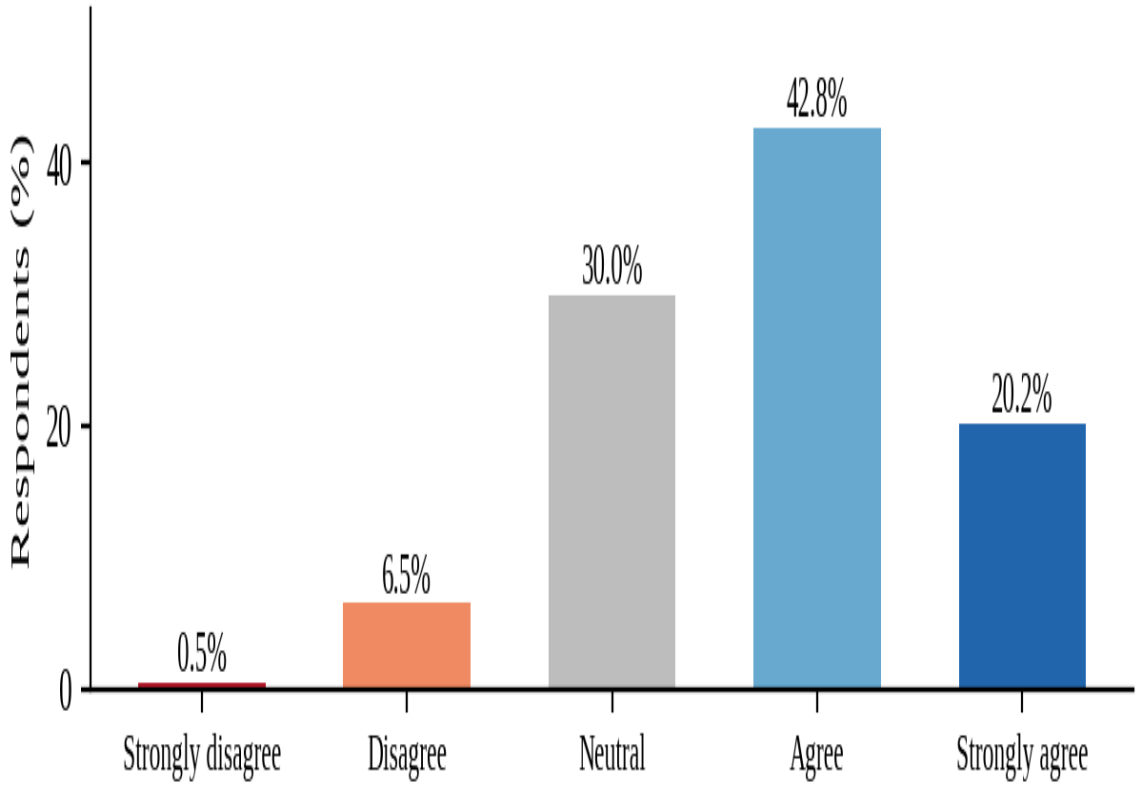



*Figure 14: Q12: Weak, mostly self-regulatory oversight allows aggressive debates to continue.*

**Finding.** 63.0 per cent agree that weak, largely self-regulatory oversight allows aggressive debates to continue, with 7.0 per cent disagreeing (mean = 3.76). Viewers share Ravi's (2013) assessment that existing codes and bodies have achieved little.

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**Q13. Aggressive debates reduce my trust in the channel that airs them.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 6 | 1.5 |
| Disagree | 27 | 6.8 |
| Neutral | 121 | 30.2 |
| Agree | 175 | 43.8 |
| Strongly agree | 71 | 17.8 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.69, SD = 0.89; agree = 61.5%, neutral = 30.3%, disagree = 8.3%.*

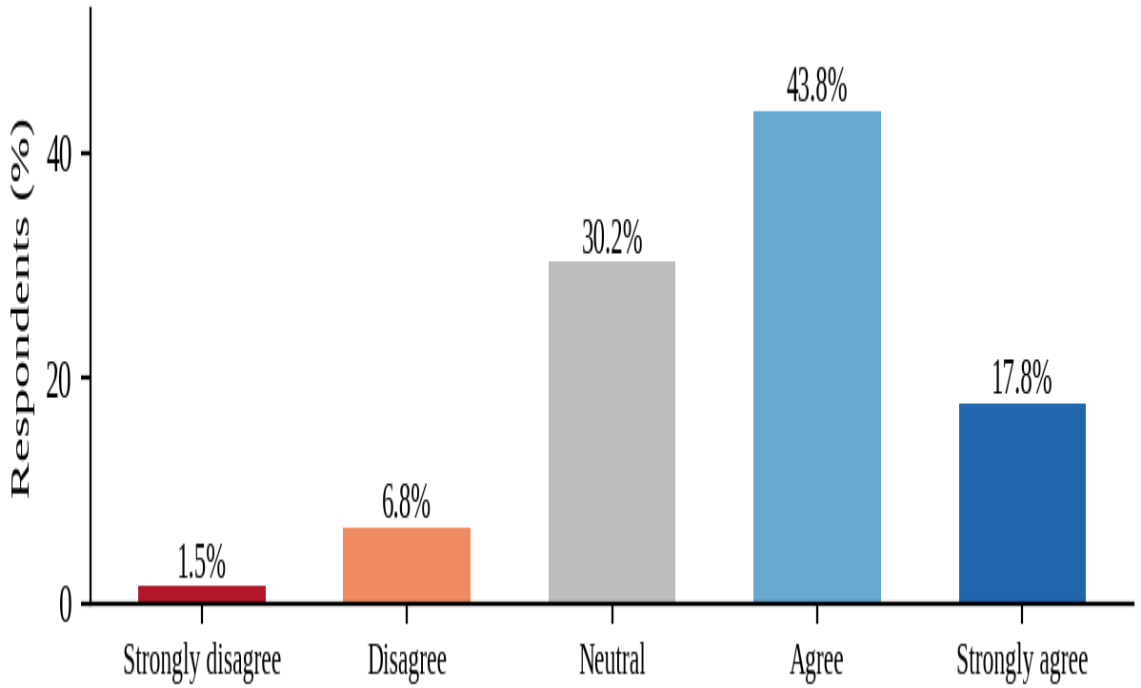



*Figure 15: Q13: Aggressive debates reduce my trust in the channel that airs them.*

**Finding.** 61.5 per cent say that aggressive debates reduce their trust in the channel that airs them, and 8.3 per cent disagree (mean = 3.69). For most viewers aggression has a perceived reputational cost, in line with the argument that visible bias affects a channel's credibility (Kumar et al., 2024). This item contributes to the Perceived Credibility Index tested in Section 9.3.

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**Q14. I trust the information presented in prime-time debates.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 48 | 12.0 |
| Disagree | 153 | 38.2 |
| Neutral | 148 | 37.0 |
| Agree | 48 | 12.0 |
| Strongly agree | 3 | 0.8 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 2.51, SD = 0.88; agree = 12.8%, neutral = 37.0%, disagree = 50.2%.*

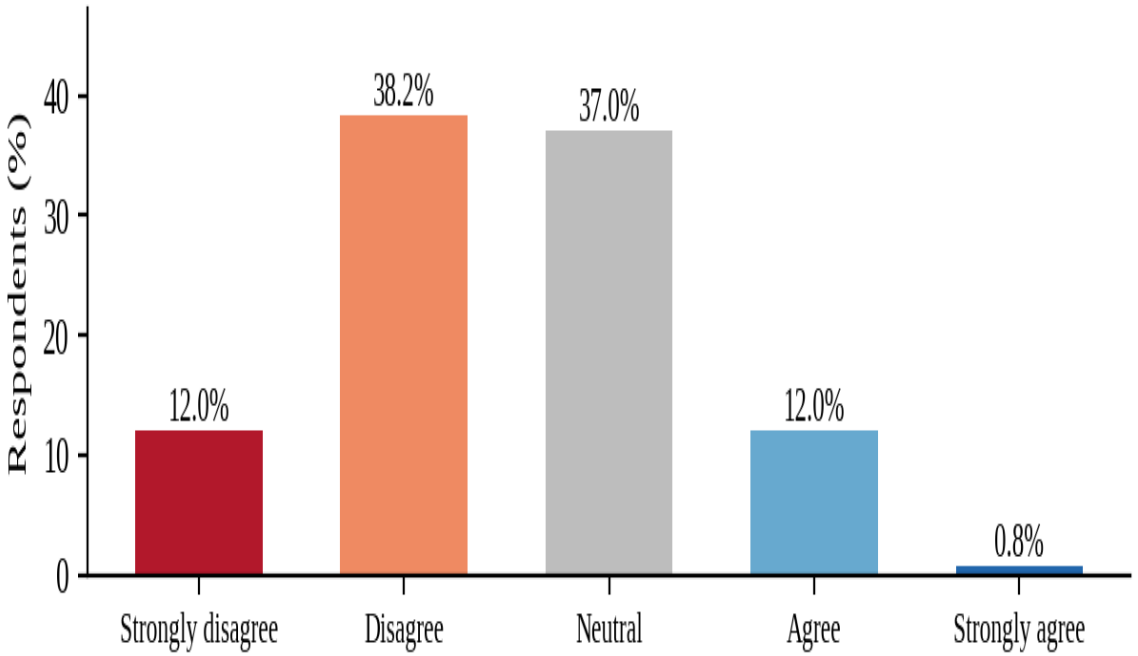



*Figure 16: Q14: I trust the information presented in prime-time debates.*

**Finding.** Only 12.8 per cent say they trust the information presented in prime-time debates, while 50.2 per cent do not (mean = 2.51). The format that millions watch nightly is thus not widely trusted as a source of information.

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**Q15. Such debates increase political polarization in society.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 0 | 0.0 |
| Disagree | 21 | 5.2 |
| Neutral | 97 | 24.2 |
| Agree | 190 | 47.5 |
| Strongly agree | 92 | 23.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.82; agree = 70.5%, neutral = 24.3%, disagree = 5.3%.*

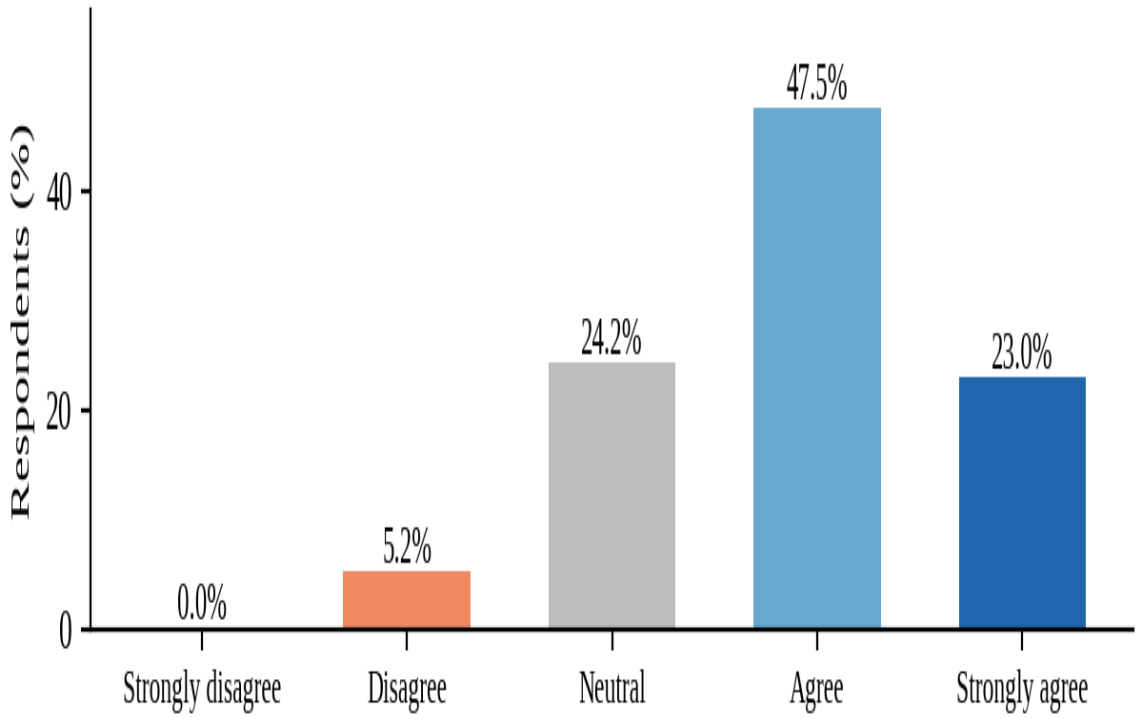



*Figure 17: Q15: Such debates increase political polarisation in society.*

**Finding.** 70.5 per cent agree that debates increase political polarisation (mean = 3.88; 5.3 per cent disagree). This corresponds to the claim that repeated two-sided confrontation can fix a single frame and deepen divisions (Pérez & Romanini, 2022), although the item captures perceived and not demonstrated polarisation.

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**Q16. Debates have increased my awareness of current issues.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 3 | 0.8 |
| Disagree | 17 | 4.2 |
| Neutral | 160 | 40.0 |
| Agree | 186 | 46.5 |
| Strongly agree | 34 | 8.5 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.58, SD = 0.74; agree = 55.0%, neutral = 40.0%, disagree = 5.0%.*

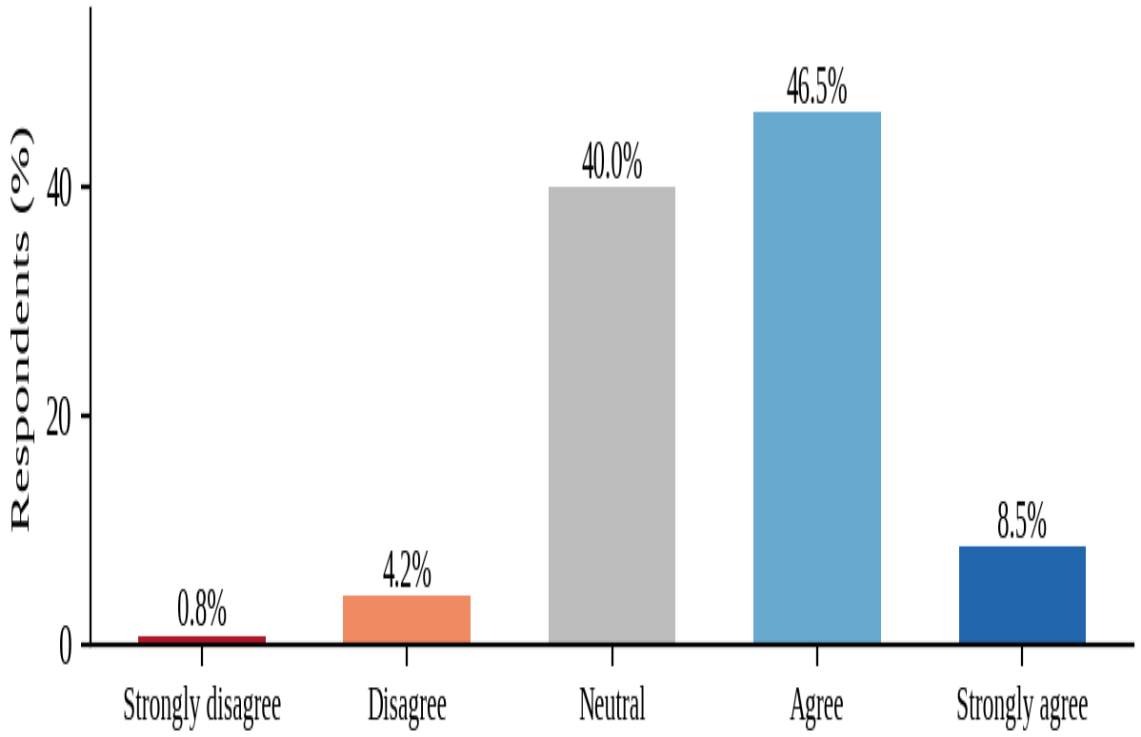



*Figure 18: Q16: Debates have increased my awareness of current issues.*

**Finding.** 55.0 per cent agree that debates have increased their awareness of current issues, and only 5.0 per cent disagree. Even viewers who find the format aggressive credit it with agenda-setting value. This supports the view that the democratic potential of the genre is real, and that reforming it is preferable to abandoning it.

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**Q17. Debates influence how I understand or frame an issue.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 1 | 0.2 |
| Disagree | 15 | 3.8 |
| Neutral | 134 | 33.5 |
| Agree | 207 | 51.7 |
| Strongly agree | 43 | 10.8 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 3.69, SD = 0.72; agree = 62.5%, neutral = 33.5%, disagree = 4.0%.*

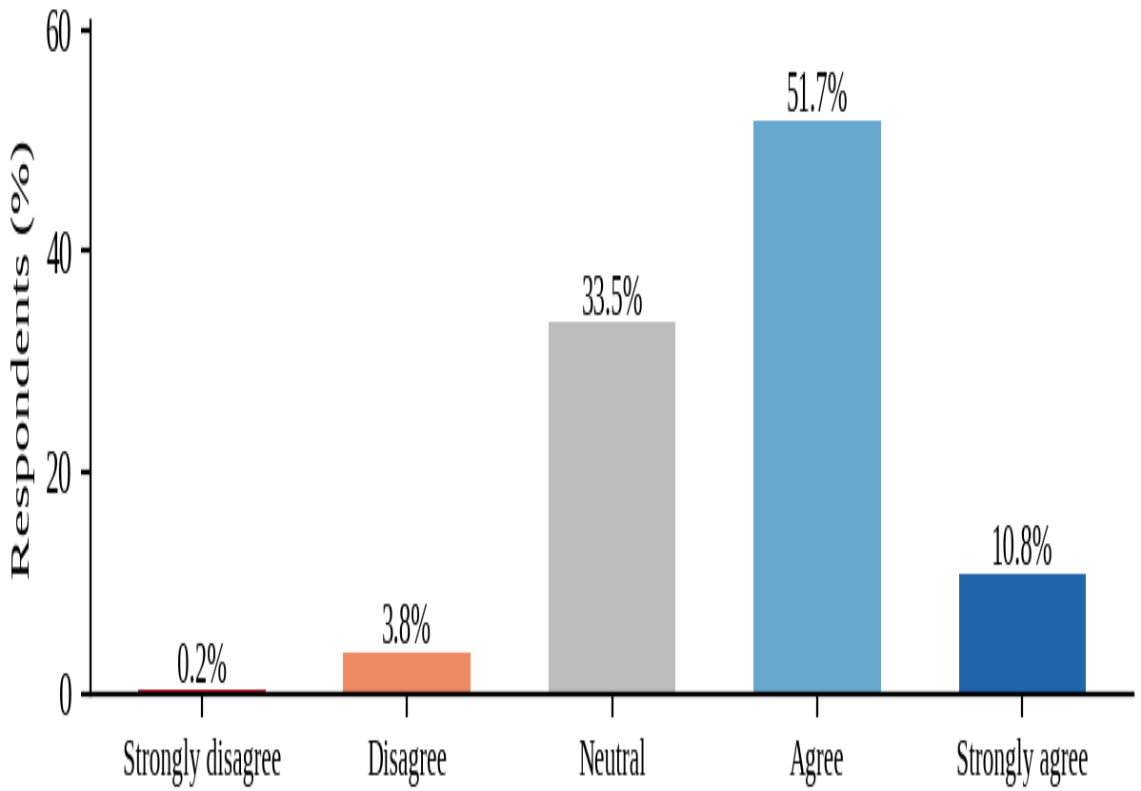



*Figure 19: Q17: Debates influence how I understand or frame an issue.*

**Finding.** 62.5 per cent agree that debates influence how they understand or frame an issue (mean = 3.69). Together with Q16, the result indicates that perceived influence is concentrated in salience and framing, as agenda-setting and framing theory would expect.

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**Q18. Debates influence whom I vote for.**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 18 | 4.5 |
| Disagree | 176 | 44.0 |
| Neutral | 175 | 43.8 |
| Agree | 29 | 7.2 |
| Strongly agree | 2 | 0.5 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

*Mean = 2.55, SD = 0.72; agree = 7.8%, neutral = 43.8%, disagree = 48.5%.*

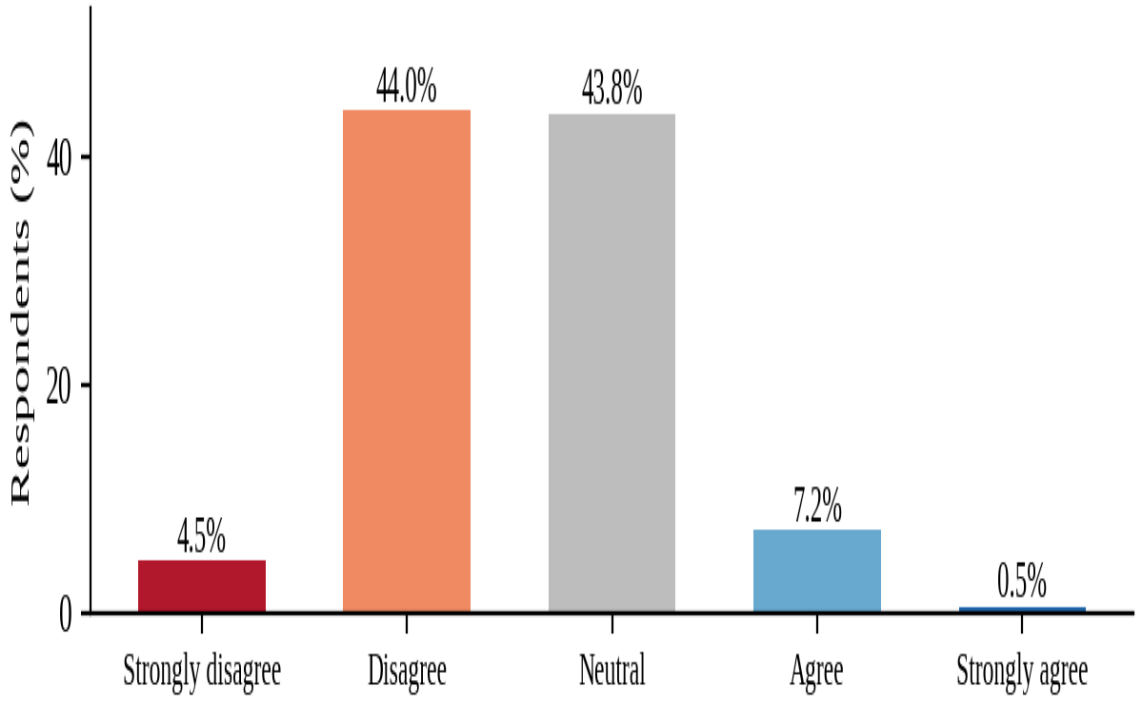



*Figure 20: Q18: Debates influence whom I vote for.*

**Finding.** Only 7.8 per cent agree that debates influence whom they vote for, while 48.5 per cent disagree (mean = 2.55). The direction is consistent with the finding of Le Pennec and Pons (2022) that debates have little effect on votes, although self-reported influence is not a measure of actual voting behaviour. The contrast with Q16 and Q17 is tested in Section 9.4.

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**Q19. Which kind of online reaction to debates do you see most often?**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Negative / angry | 152 | 38.0 |
| Sarcastic / humorous | 128 | 32.0 |
| Supportive of panellists | 68 | 17.0 |
| Informative / analytical | 52 | 13.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

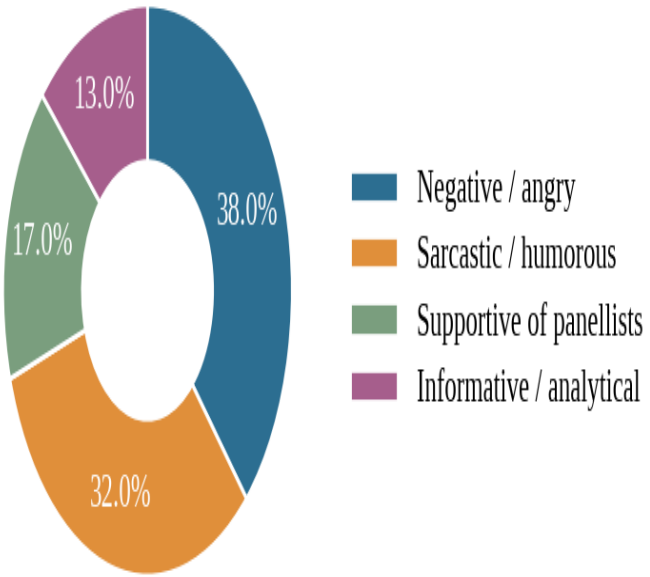



*Figure 21: Q19: Which kind of online reaction to debates do you see most often?*

**Finding.** Negative or angry reactions are seen most often (38.0 per cent), followed by sarcastic or humorous ones (32.0 per cent), so 70.0 per cent of respondents mainly see hostile or mocking online talk. Only 13.0 per cent mostly see informative or analytical reaction. The result matches Trilling's (2014) finding that online commentary on debates is dominated by negative and humorous content.

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**Q20. Which debate format would you prefer?**

| Response | Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Calm, expert-led discussion | 188 | 47.0 |
| Balanced mix of debate and expert input | 112 | 28.0 |
| Heated, high-energy debate | 44 | 11.0 |
| News reports instead of debates | 56 | 14.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **100.0** |

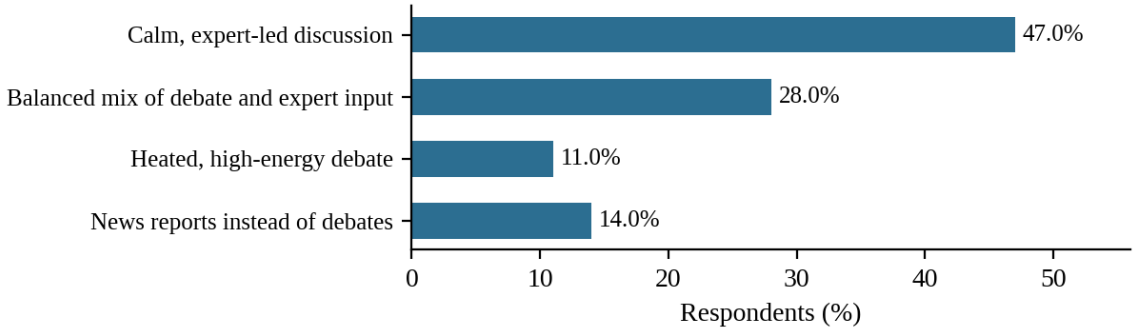



*Figure 22: Q20: Which debate format would you prefer?*

**Finding.** 47.0 per cent prefer a calm, expert-led discussion and 28.0 per cent a balanced mix, so 75.0 per cent favour a more measured format. Only 11.0 per cent prefer heated debate, and 14.0 per cent would rather have news reports than debates. The data do not support the claim that audiences demand aggression, and suggest, as Batabyal (2010) argued, that the apparent preference for it may be partly shaped by how audiences are measured.

## 11. Conclusions

The study set out to examine how regular viewers in Delhi-NCR perceive the shift of prime-time television news debates from informative discussion to aggressive presentation. All four null hypotheses were rejected. Viewers rate debates as significantly aggressive (mean index 3.87 against a midpoint of 3), and 73.0 per cent agree that debates are more aggressive and less informative than a decade ago. Interruption, controversy-led topics, partisan panels and anchors who take sides are all widely recognised, and only 15.0 per cent believe that they learn reliable information from debates today. On Objective 1, the perception of a movement towards the aggressive presentation model is strong.

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On Objective 2, viewers explain aggressive debates mainly through structural pressures rather than individual anchors: the TRP race (38.0 per cent), advertising revenue and political or ownership pressure together account for 84.0 per cent of responses, and the distribution is significantly unequal. Viewers' lay explanation therefore matches the political-economy account developed by Batabyal (2010) and Ravi (2013). Private channels are seen as more aggressive by 58.0 per cent, but 24.0 per cent see no difference, so ownership alone does not separate civil from aggressive debates.

On Objective 3, perceived aggression and perceived credibility are strongly and negatively related ($r = -0.73$), and 61.5 per cent say that aggression reduces their trust in the channel. For broadcasters, this implies that the attention gained through confrontation is purchased at the expense of credibility. On Objective 4, viewers credit debates with raising awareness and shaping the framing of issues (mean 3.63) far more than with influencing their votes (mean 2.55). This pattern is consistent with the view that loud debates matter more for narratives, salience and the tone of public conversation than for electoral choice, and it fits the negative, sarcastic online conversation that 70.0 per cent of respondents report seeing.

Finally, the preference data challenge the claim that audiences demand aggression: 75.0 per cent prefer a calm or balanced format, and only 11.0 per cent prefer heated debate. At the same time, 55.0 per cent credit debates with raising their awareness, so the democratic potential of the format remains. The task is to preserve that potential while reducing the incentives that degrade it.

**Recommendations**

- **Broadcasters** should revisit ratings-based performance measures for editorial staff, diversify recruitment beyond the affluent urban segment (Batabyal, 2010), and adopt internal standards for panel balance, evidence for accusations and moderator conduct.
- **Regulators and industry bodies** should strengthen the enforcement and public visibility of self-regulation while avoiding laws that would endanger media independence (Ravi, 2013).
- **Public service broadcasters** should defend a distinctive informative model of debate and protect it from revenue-driven pressure (Norris, 2001; Ravi, 2013).

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- **Audience research** should be broadened to include rural and marginalised viewers so that ratings no longer define the audience as only the affluent (Batabyal, 2010).
- **Media literacy initiatives** should help viewers recognise framing, repetition and performative conflict, and treat social-media reaction as a partial signal and not as public opinion (Ravi, 2013; Trilling, 2014).

### Limitations and future research

The study rests on a non-probability sample of urban viewers in one region, so its findings cannot be generalised to all Indian viewers. All measures are self-reported perceptions, and neither actual debate content nor actual voting behaviour was observed. The cross-sectional design cannot establish that aggression causes lower credibility, and the comparison with "a decade ago" rests on viewers' recollection. Future research should combine viewer surveys with systematic content analysis of recent prime-time debates on public and private Hindi and English channels, extend sampling to rural and small-town audiences, and use interviews with news professionals to test the same hypotheses from the production side.

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