

Thematic Priorities in Indian Prime-Time Television Debates: A Comparative Content Analysis of Republic World and Times Now

Andleeb Raza¹, Dr. Rahul Kumar^{2*}

¹ Research Scholar, Journalism and Mass Communication, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India.

ORCID: 0009-0008-3074-0663

Email: razamalikandleeb@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India.

Corresponding Author

Andleeb Raza

Email: razamalikandleeb@gmail.com.

Abstract

This study examines the thematic priorities of prime-time television debates broadcast on two English-language Indian news channels, Republic World and Times Now. A sample of 77 prime-time debates broadcast between 7 October and 7 November 2022 was identified from the official YouTube channels of the two networks and classified through content analysis into 11 thematic categories on the basis of each debate's tagline and caption. The findings show that religion was the most frequently occurring theme in the combined sample (31 of 77 debates, 40.3%), followed by politics (16 debates, 20.8%) and environment (9 debates, 11.7%). No debates in the sample were classified under economy, unemployment, or health during the one-month observation period. The findings are discussed in relation to Agenda-Setting Theory, with the frequency of thematic categories interpreted as an indicator of relative salience within the sampled media agenda rather than as evidence of audience effects, ideological bias, or misinformation. The study's scope is limited to two channels, a one-month observation period, single-coder classification, and reliance on taglines and captions rather than complete debate transcripts; these limitations are discussed in detail in Section 7....

Keywords: Prime-Time Television Debates; Agenda Setting; Issue Salience; Indian Television News; Thematic Priorities

INTRODUCTION

Television news remains a central component of the Indian media landscape, and prime-time programming in particular provides a visible platform for discussion of social, political, and public issues. Television debates are a prominent feature of this landscape: anchors, political representatives, experts, and other participants discuss current issues in a format that goes beyond the straightforward reporting of events. News organisations must also decide which topics to include and which to prioritise. These editorial decisions matter because issues that are discussed repeatedly become more visible in public discourse, while other issues receive comparatively little or no attention.

The significance of issue selection can be understood through the agenda-setting function of the media. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that the salience assigned to issues in the news media is associated with the salience the public attributes to those same issues. Read in this light, the media salience of an issue can be approximated by the frequency with which it appears in news coverage. Prime-time television debates are a particularly relevant site for this kind of analysis, since editorial teams must repeatedly decide which topics will occupy a limited number of prominent broadcast slots. Examining the themes selected for these debates can therefore indicate which issues are relatively more, or less, prominent within the sampled television news agenda.

This question is especially pertinent to Indian television news. Opinion-oriented programming has become an established part of contemporary Indian television journalism, with discussion and interpretation now integral to prime-time schedules. Devi (2019) traced the emergence of a “views” culture in Indian television news and observed that opinion-based programming has gained prominence relative to fact-based reporting. The manner in which news channels select and structure topics for on-air debate is therefore a key area for understanding how prime-time programmes operate.

Research on Indian English-language political talk shows has also raised questions about the character of public debate these programmes generate. Bhat and Chadha (2023), in a study of India's leading English-language political talk shows, examined the role of these programmes as sites of political and public communication and highlighted the presence of religious majoritarian discourse within the talk-show format. This finding suggests that the thematic and discursive emphases of prime-time programmes should not be assumed to simply mirror the events of the day, but instead warrant systematic examination.

Nationalism, political conflict, and religious identity have similarly emerged as significant areas of research on Indian television news. Kumar (2023a) analysed prime-time monologues on Republic TV and Times Now during the India–China border conflict to examine how nationalist narratives were constructed on these platforms; this study is particularly relevant to the present research because Republic TV and Times Now are the same two channels examined here. Kumar (2023b), in a separate study, examined how Muslims were represented in Indian television debate discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating how religious identity can become embedded in debate content. Taken together, these studies underline the importance of studying religion, nationalism, and political conflict in Indian television news, while also pointing to the need to examine how these themes are positioned relative to other public issues within the same sample.

The selection of debate topics is significant precisely because the visibility any given issue receives on the television news agenda can vary considerably from one topic to another. The relative prominence of a category can be assessed by how frequently it appears in the sampled debates whether it is consistently represented, represented only occasionally, or absent altogether. It is important to emphasise that thematic prominence, as measured through frequency of occurrence, should not be equated with misinformation, bias, or post-truth communication. Frequency indicates the presence of a theme within the sampled media agenda; it says nothing about how a theme was framed or discussed, which would require analysis of the debates themselves.

While existing scholarship has examined Indian television debates, nationalism, religious representation, and opinion-oriented programming, comparatively little research has compared the overall distribution of themes across major English-language prime-time debate programmes within a single, clearly defined observation period. The present study adopts a thematic approach, examining the relative prominence of a broad range of issue categories religion, politics, environment, Pakistan, Kashmir, nationalism, terrorism, economy, unemployment, health, and other issues in the prime-time debate agendas of Republic World and Times Now, rather than focusing on a single theme such as religion or nationalism in isolation.

For this study, 77 prime-time television debates broadcast on the official YouTube channels of Republic World and Times Now between 7 October and 7 November 2022 were analysed. The study examines which themes received the most attention, how thematic focus varied between the two channels, and how socio-economic and public-interest themes were represented relative to themes concerned with religion, politics, identity, and conflict. The analysis shows that religion was the most frequently discussed theme in the sample, while economy, unemployment, and health did not appear as the principal theme of any sampled debate. The study draws on the concept of issue salience to interpret this pattern and to characterise the thematic priorities visible in the sampled English-language prime-time debates.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What themes dominated prime-time television debates on Republic World and Times Now during the selected study period?

RQ2: How did the thematic priorities of Republic World and Times Now differ during the study period?

RQ3: How prominently were socio-economic and public-interest issues represented relative to religious, political, identity-, and conflict-oriented themes?

2. Review of Literature

Prime-time debate programming has become an integral feature of contemporary Indian television journalism. Unlike conventional news bulletins, which primarily report facts and events, debate-based programmes give anchors, politicians, experts, and other participants space to interpret and discuss current issues, giving greater weight to opinion and interpretation within television news. Devi (2019) used the concept of a “views” culture to analyse the growth of opinion journalism in India and the increasing overlap between news and views in Indian

television, showing that Indian television news can be understood as operating at two levels: an informational level and an opinion-and-interpretation level.

The debate format is significant because it provides a public forum in which political and social issues are identified and discussed. Bhat and Chadha (2023) examined India's leading English-language political talk shows to assess their contribution to public discourse. Their analysis raises doubts about whether these programmes necessarily broaden meaningful public debate and highlights the presence of religious majoritarian discourse within this television environment. Their work is directly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that political talk shows are not simply neutral forums for the exchange of views, but sites whose discursive character merits close study.

This body of research supports the case for studying the prime-time debate format as a distinct genre of Indian television journalism. The topics selected for debate, and the emphasis placed on particular issues, shape the kind of discourse to which viewers are exposed. A thematic analysis of prime-time programming is therefore useful for identifying which issues receive sustained attention and which remain comparatively invisible.

Religion and religious identity have become important areas of research on Indian television news. Bhat and Chadha (2023) identified religious majoritarian discourse as a recurring concern in English-language political talk shows, suggesting that religion occupies a prominent place in the television political agenda and warrants closer attention to its salience in prime-time political debate. Kumar (2023b) provides more specific evidence of religious representation in Indian television debate discourse, examining how the image of Muslims was invoked during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research demonstrates that religious identity can become a significant element of debate discourse, while also indicating that such discourse takes varied forms that are not uniformly communal or prejudicial. For the purposes of the present study, this literature indicates that the frequency with which religion is selected as a debate theme can indicate its prominence within the television agenda, but frequency alone cannot indicate whether the associated discussion was biased, communal, factual, or emotionally charged; establishing that would require analysis of the language and arguments used within the debates themselves.

A second area of relevant research concerns nationalism. Kumar (2023a) examined how prime-time programmes on Republic TV and Times Now constructed nationalist narratives during the India–China border conflict. This study is of particular relevance because it examines the same two channels studied here, and because it demonstrates the relevance of examining the relationship between television news, nationalism, and geopolitical events. However, the present study differs in scope: whereas Kumar (2023a) focused specifically on nationalist narrative construction in the context of a single geopolitical event, the present study compares the frequency of a wider range of themes religion, politics, Pakistan, Kashmir, nationalism, terrorism, environment, economy, unemployment, and health across a defined observation period.

Distinguishing between political and conflict-related categories is analytically useful because such issues can manifest in prime-time programming in different ways. A debate concerning Pakistan, for example, is not necessarily equivalent to a debate primarily concerned with nationalism, terrorism, or domestic politics. Treating these as separate categories allows the thematic structure of the sampled programming to be examined without assuming that all political or conflict-related issues serve the same function.

The rationale for examining thematic priorities in this way draws on the broader tradition of agenda-setting research in communication studies. McCombs and Shaw (1972), in their seminal study, demonstrated that media coverage plays a central role in shaping the salience of political issues, establishing a link between the salience of news coverage and the salience the public attributes to the same issues.

Applied to content analysis, this framework highlights an important feature of the editorial process: news organisations must prioritise some issues while deferring others, and the frequency and salience of issues in coverage offer one way of tracking this process. When a topic is selected for prime-time debate, it occupies a visible slot within a finite amount of broadcast time; repeated selection can therefore be read as an indicator of higher salience within the sampled media agenda, while limited or absent selection indicates comparatively lower visibility within that same agenda.

This approach is well suited to comparing prime-time debate programmes, since such programmes operate under time constraints and can address only a subset of the available social, political, and economic issues at any given time. The relative visibility of different issues may therefore vary between sampled programmes, and this variation can be examined systematically by comparing the frequency with which different thematic categories appear.

It is important, however, to distinguish between the media agenda and the public agenda. Content analysis can indicate the relative prominence of issues within a sample of television programming; it cannot, on its own, establish that viewers regarded those issues as important as a result of exposure to that coverage. Establishing an effect on the public agenda would require the collection of audience-level data. The present study is accordingly limited to the media agenda and the salience of issues within sampled television content, and it does not attribute any direct effect to audiences.

2.1 Research Gap

Existing scholarship has considerably advanced understanding of specific aspects of Indian prime-time television: the growth of opinion-oriented journalism (Devi, 2019), the character of English-language political talk shows (Bhat & Chadha, 2023), the representation of religious identity in debate discourse (Kumar, 2023b), and the construction of nationalist narratives on Republic TV and Times Now (Kumar, 2023a). Collectively, these studies establish Indian prime-time television as a significant site for research from political, religious, and identity-based perspectives.

At the same time, each of these studies has examined a specific dimension of televised discourse opinion journalism, political talk shows, religious representation, or nationalism largely in isolation. Taken together, they create an opportunity to examine the broader distribution of themes within prime-time debate agendas over a comparable observation period, revealing not only which themes appear, but also their relative visibility and the absence of other themes from the sampled agenda.

The present study addresses this gap by comparing prime-time debates on Republic World and Times Now within a defined one-month period in 2022. It proceeds from the premise that no single thematic category can be assumed to dominate television debate discourse, and it examines religion, politics, environment, Pakistan, Kashmir, nationalism, terrorism, economy, unemployment, health, and other issues in a systematic manner. This design allows the study to assess the relative salience of religion, politics, identity, and conflict-related issues in comparison with socio-economic and public-interest issues, building on prior research by comparing themes across two major English-language television news channels within the same observation window.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

This study is grounded in Agenda-Setting Theory as developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Their seminal study of the 1968 United States presidential election examined the relationship between the issues covered by the mass media and those that voters considered important, and established that the level of media attention given to an issue is associated with its salience in the public agenda.

In the present study, the media agenda is operationalised as the number of debates devoted to each thematic category within the sampled prime-time programming. Because prime-time programmes operate within a limited broadcast window, different issues necessarily receive different levels of attention; an issue that occurs more frequently in the sample can be considered more salient within the sampled media agenda than one that occurs less frequently. This logic underlies the comparison of thematic categories reported in the Findings.

The theory is directly applicable to prime-time television debates because broadcast time is finite: selecting one topic for debate necessarily limits the visibility available to other topics during the same period. Analysing the salience of themes across a fixed observation window therefore provides a way of assessing the relative salience of issues within the sampled media agenda.

It is important to note the boundaries of this framework as applied here. The study analyses issue salience within the sampled media content; it does not examine the substantive characteristics of how particular issues were treated. The analysis can establish that religion, politics, or unemployment were selected as debate themes, but it cannot indicate whether a given discussion of religion was framed positively or negatively, or whether a political discussion favoured a particular ideological position.

The distinction between media salience and audience effects is similarly important. This study does not measure public opinion and therefore cannot determine whether the thematic priorities of Republic World or Times Now influenced audience perceptions of issue importance. The media agenda understood here as the distribution of themes across sampled debates is analysed strictly within the terms of Agenda-Setting Theory; conclusions regarding actual effects on public opinion fall outside the scope of this study.

Within this framework, both the presence and the absence of a theme are analytically meaningful. Repeated selection indicates greater visibility within the sampled media agenda, while limited or no selection indicates comparatively lower visibility during the observation period. This framework supports a comparative analysis of the relative position of religious, political, environmental, geopolitical, and socio-economic issues without presupposing the relative legitimacy or importance of any category.

Applied to the present study, Agenda-Setting Theory links the concept of thematic salience to the comparison of theme frequencies across the 77 sampled prime-time debates from Republic World and Times Now. This framework directly informs the study's three research questions: which issues were most prominent in the sampled agenda, how the two channels compared in their thematic priorities, and how socio-economic and public-interest issues fared relative to religious, political, identity-, and conflict-oriented issues.

3.2 Conceptual Application to the Present Study

The relationship between theory and method in this study can be summarised as follows: the selection of topics for prime-time debate determines the number of times a given topic appears within the sampled media agenda, and this frequency is treated as an indicator of the topic's relative salience within that agenda. The unit of interpretation throughout is the sampled media agenda, not audience opinion.

Within this scheme, higher frequency is interpreted as greater prominence within the sampled programming; lower frequency indicates comparatively lower prominence; and zero frequency indicates that a theme was not selected as the principal focus of any debate within the observation period. These interpretations apply only to the sampled channels, programmes, and study period, and should not be generalised to the Indian television agenda as a whole. This theoretical framework also bounds the generalisations that can reasonably be drawn from the study. The analysis can identify trends in thematic selection and compare the visibility of issues across the two channels; it cannot, on the basis of thematic frequency alone, establish misinformation, ideological bias, emotional manipulation, or post-truth communication. Investigating those questions would require further analysis of debate language, factual claims, sourcing, framing, and argumentation. Agenda-Setting Theory is therefore well suited to this study because it corresponds directly to what the study measures: which issues were selected, and how frequently they appeared, within the sampled prime-time debate agenda.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study used quantitative content analysis to examine the thematic priorities of prime-time television debates broadcast on two English-language Indian news channels. The analysis focused on identifying and comparing the principal themes selected for debate, rather than on the detailed verbal content of the programmes themselves. Accordingly, the study documents the occurrence of each thematic category across the sampled debate programmes over the study period.

4.2 Selection of News Channels and Programmes

Two English-language Indian television news channels were selected for the study: Republic World and Times Now. The analysis covered the prime-time debate programme anchored by Arnab Goswami on Republic World, and the prime-time debate programmes anchored by Navika Kumar, Madhavdas K., and Padmaja Joshi on Times Now. These programmes were selected because they occupy the flagship prime-time debate slots on their respective channels. The study was limited to these two English-language channels and did not include Hindi-language, regional-language, or other English-language television news channels.

4.3 Sampling Procedure and Study Period

Data were collected for a one-month period, from 7 October to 7 November 2022. The debates were identified and retrieved from the official YouTube channels of Republic World and Times Now, which upload full-length recordings of their prime-time debate programmes.

Debates were identified through a manual, chronological review of all videos uploaded to the two official YouTube channels within the study period. A video was included in the sample if it met all of the following criteria: (a) it was uploaded to the official YouTube channel of Republic World or Times Now between 7 October and 7 November 2022; (b) it was presented as a complete, standalone episode of the identified prime-time debate programme, featuring the relevant anchor and a panel of guests discussing one or more current issues; and (c) it was accompanied by a tagline or caption sufficient to identify the debate's principal subject matter. Videos were

excluded if they were short highlight clips, promotional teasers, re-uploads or compilations of previously broadcast material, or programming that fell outside the identified prime-time debate slots (for example, morning bulletins or entertainment content uploaded to the same channel).

Applying these criteria yielded a final sample of 77 debates: 27 from Republic World and 50 from Times Now. The larger number of eligible debates from Times Now reflects the greater number of prime-time debate programmes broadcast on that channel (across three anchors) during the study period, rather than a difference in the sampling procedure applied to the two channels. The same one-month window was applied to both channels so that thematic distributions could be compared within an identical time frame.

4.4 Unit of Analysis and Data Collection

The individual prime-time television debate constituted the unit of analysis. The study did not code complete debate transcripts. Instead, the tagline and caption associated with each sampled debate on YouTube were used to determine its principal thematic focus. This approach was adopted because taglines and captions are the primary paratextual elements through which the broadcasters themselves frame and promote each debate's subject matter, and because coding full transcripts of 77 debates (each with an average duration of approximately 38 minutes) was beyond the resources available for this study. Programme duration was recorded but was not used as a measure of thematic prominence.

4.5 Thematic Categories and Operational Definitions

Debates were classified into 11 mutually exclusive thematic categories: Religion, Economy, Unemployment, Environment, Pakistan, Kashmir, Nationalism, Health, Politics, Terrorism, and Others. These categories were developed inductively from a preliminary review of debate taglines across both channels, and were defined as follows prior to coding:

Religion: debates whose principal focus concerned religious identity, inter-religious relations, or religious institutions and practices.

Economy: debates concerning economic policy, macroeconomic developments, trade, or economic trends and activities with clear economic implications.

Unemployment: debates concerning unemployment, joblessness, student or job-seeker protests, and government policy relating to employment.

Environment: debates concerning natural disasters, floods, earthquakes, air quality, water resources, and related environmental issues.

Pakistan: debates primarily concerning Pakistan, Pakistan-administered Kashmir, or Balochistan.

Kashmir: debates primarily concerning developments in Jammu and Kashmir.

Nationalism: debates whose principal focus was national identity or nationalist discourse, distinct from religion.

Health: debates concerning public health issues, the healthcare system, or developments in medicine.

Politics: debates primarily concerning central or state-level political parties, elections, or political developments not classified under another category.

Terrorism: debates concerning terrorism, terrorist attacks, cross-border infiltration, or targeted killings.

Others: debates whose principal subject did not fall within the categories above, including law-and-order issues, disinformation, and film-industry matters.

Religion and nationalism were treated as analytically distinct categories throughout coding: debates centred on religious identity or inter-religious relations were coded as Religion, while debates centred on national identity or sovereignty, without a primary religious frame, were coded as Nationalism.

4.6 Coding Procedure and Reliability

Each debate was assigned to a single principal thematic category based on the subject matter indicated by its tagline and caption. Where a tagline or caption appeared to reference more than one potential theme, the theme given primary emphasis typically the subject named first or foregrounded in the headline portion of the tagline was coded as the debate's principal theme; secondary or incidental references within the same tagline were not coded separately. This decision rule ensured that every debate contributed to exactly one category and that the resulting frequencies summed to the total sample size, but it also means that a debate touching on more than one theme is represented in the results only by its single, dominant theme.

All coding was carried out by a single researcher. No second coder independently coded any portion of the sample, and no formal intercoder reliability statistic (such as Cohen's kappa or Krippendorff's alpha) was calculated. This

is acknowledged as a methodological limitation of the study (see Section 7): single-coder classification cannot rule out the possibility of coder-specific interpretation in borderline cases, particularly where a tagline referenced more than one theme.

4.7 Data Analysis

Once coding was complete, the number of debates falling into each thematic category was tallied separately for Republic World and Times Now, and frequencies were compared across the two channels. Channel-level frequencies were then combined to produce the distribution of themes across the full sample of 77 debates.

Percentages were calculated to indicate the relative representation of each theme within the sampled prime-time debate agenda. Consistent with Agenda-Setting Theory as applied in this study (Section 3), a higher-frequency theme is interpreted as more prominent within the sampled programming during the study period, and a lower-frequency or absent theme is interpreted as comparatively less prominent within that same sample. The analysis was restricted to thematic frequency and comparative distribution; it did not assess the factual accuracy of debate content, the ideological positions of individual speakers, audience reaction, or any effect the programmes may have had on public opinion.

5. Findings

During the study period, 77 prime-time television debates were analysed: 27 from Republic World and 50 from Times Now. Debates were classified into 11 thematic categories religion, economy, unemployment, environment, Pakistan, Kashmir, nationalism, health, politics, terrorism, and others. The frequency and percentage distribution of each theme, by channel and combined, is reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of Themes in Prime-Time Debates on Republic World and Times Now

Theme	Republic World n	Republic World %	Times Now n	Times Now %	Combined n	Combined %
Religion	8	29.6	23	46.0	31	40.3
Economy	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Unemployment	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Environment	3	11.1	6	12.0	9	11.7
Pakistan	2	7.4	1	2.0	3	3.9
Kashmir	2	7.4	3	6.0	5	6.5
Nationalism	1	3.7	1	2.0	2	2.6
Health	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Politics	6	22.2	10	20.0	16	20.8
Terrorism	2	7.4	3	6.0	5	6.5
Others	3	11.1	3	6.0	6	7.8
Total	27	100.0	50	100.0	77	100.0

Note. Percentages were calculated from the frequencies reported in the dataset and rounded to one decimal place. Column percentages sum to 100.0% within each channel and within the combined sample, subject to rounding.

5.1 Overall Distribution of Themes

Religion was the most frequently identified theme across the combined sample, accounting for 31 of the 77 debates (40.3%). Politics was the second most frequent theme, appearing in 16 debates (20.8%), followed by environment with 9 debates (11.7%). The “Others” category accounted for 6 debates (7.8%), while Kashmir and terrorism each appeared in 5 debates (6.5%). Pakistan was represented in 3 debates (3.9%), and nationalism appeared in 2 debates (2.6%). No debates in the sample were classified under economy, unemployment, or health.

5.2 Thematic Distribution on Republic World

A total of 27 Republic World debates were included in the analysis. Religion was the most frequent theme, appearing in 8 debates (29.6%), followed by politics with 6 debates (22.2%). Environment and the “Others” category each accounted for 3 debates (11.1%). Pakistan, Kashmir, and terrorism each appeared in 2 debates (7.4%), while nationalism was identified in 1 debate (3.7%). No Republic World debate in the sample was classified under economy, unemployment, or health.

Figure 1. Thematic Distribution — Republic World (n = 27)

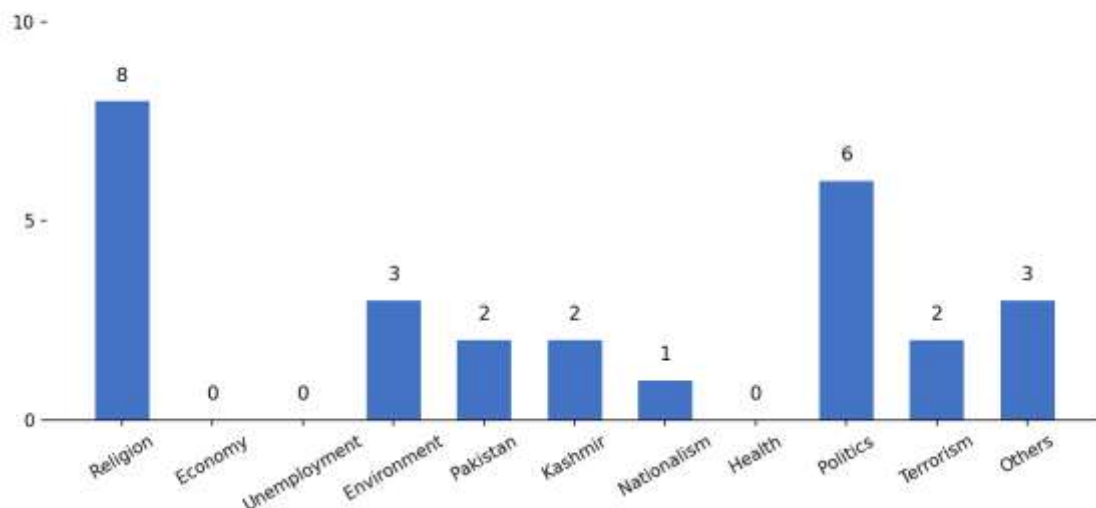


Figure 1. Thematic Distribution of Prime-Time Debates on Republic World (n = 27)

5.3 Thematic Distribution on Times Now

A total of 50 Times Now debates were included in the analysis. Religion was the most frequent theme, accounting for 23 debates (46.0%), followed by politics with 10 debates (20.0%) and environment with 6 debates (12.0%). Kashmir, terrorism, and the “Others” category each accounted for 3 debates (6.0%). Pakistan and nationalism were each represented in 1 debate (2.0%). No Times Now debate in the sample was classified under economy, unemployment, or health.

Figure 2. Thematic Distribution — Times Now (n = 50)

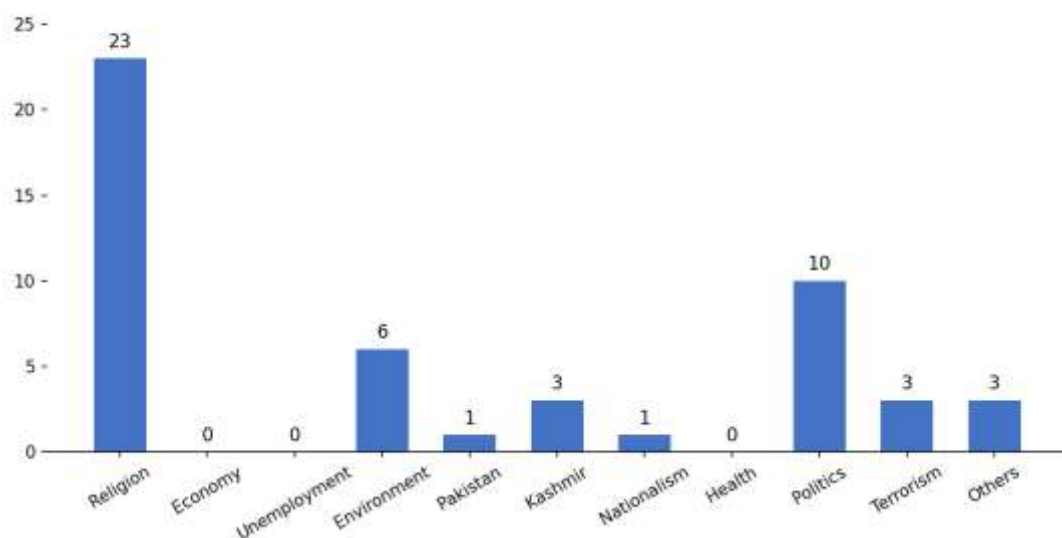


Figure 2. Thematic Distribution of Prime-Time Debates on Times Now (n = 50)

5.4 Cross-Channel Comparison

Religion was the most frequent category on both channels, accounting for 29.6% of Republic World debates and 46.0% of Times Now debates. Politics ranked second on both channels, representing 22.2% and 20.0% of debates, respectively. Environment accounted for 11.1% of Republic World debates and 12.0% of Times Now debates. Among the less frequent categories, Kashmir represented 7.4% of Republic World debates and 6.0% of Times Now debates, and terrorism accounted for the same respective proportions. Pakistan represented 7.4% of Republic World debates compared with 2.0% of Times Now debates, while nationalism accounted for 3.7% and 2.0%, respectively. Economy, unemployment, and health recorded no debates on either channel during the sampled period.

6. Discussion

The results show marked variation in the attention given to different themes within the sampled debates. This section discusses the findings in relation to the study's three research questions before considering their theoretical implications and the appropriate interpretation of the absent themes.

6.1 RQ1: Dominant Themes in the Sampled Agenda

RQ1 asked which themes dominated prime-time television debates on Republic World and Times Now during the study period. Religion was clearly the dominant theme in the combined sample, accounting for 31 of 77 debates (40.3%) more than twice the share of the next most frequent category. Politics followed as the second most prominent theme (20.8%), and environment was the third most frequent (11.7%). Kashmir, terrorism, Pakistan, nationalism, and the residual "Others" category together accounted for the remaining debates in smaller proportions. This ordering religion, then politics, then environment was consistent across both the combined sample and each individual channel, indicating a stable thematic hierarchy within the sampled agenda during the observation period.

The prominence of religion is consistent with earlier research on Indian television debate discourse. Bhat and Chadha (2023) identified religious majoritarian discourse as a recurring feature of English-language political talk shows, and Kumar (2023b) documented the salience of religious identity within Indian television debate discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present findings do not indicate that the religion-related debates identified here took the same discursive form as those examined in earlier studies that question falls outside the scope of a thematic frequency analysis but the findings are consistent with this literature in showing that religion occupied a prominent position within the sampled prime-time agenda during the study period.

6.2 RQ2: Differences Between Republic World and Times Now

RQ2 asked how the thematic priorities of Republic World and Times Now differed during the study period. The two channels showed a broadly similar thematic hierarchy religion first, politics second, environment third but differed in the relative weight given to religion. Religion accounted for 46.0% of Times Now's sampled debates but 29.6% of Republic World's, a difference of over 16 percentage points. Politics and environment, by contrast, were represented at similar levels on both channels (22.2% versus 20.0% for politics; 11.1% versus 12.0% for environment). The two channels diverged more noticeably on Pakistan, which accounted for 7.4% of Republic World's debates but only 2.0% of Times Now's debates. Overall, the two channels resembled one another in the broad ordering of themes, but Times Now's sampled agenda was comparatively more concentrated on religion, while Republic World's sampled agenda was somewhat more evenly spread across religion, politics, and geopolitically themed categories such as Pakistan and Kashmir.

6.3 RQ3: Socio-Economic and Public-Interest Issues Relative to Religious, Political, Identity-, and Conflict-Oriented Themes

RQ3 asked how prominently socio-economic and public-interest issues were represented relative to religious, political, identity-, and conflict-oriented themes. Of the 11 thematic categories examined, three economy, unemployment, and health were classified as socio-economic or public-interest themes. None of the 77 sampled debates on either channel was classified under any of these three categories. By contrast, religion, politics, and the identity- and conflict-related categories (Pakistan, Kashmir, nationalism, terrorism) together accounted for the entire sample. This represents a pronounced asymmetry: within the sampled agenda, socio-economic and public-interest issues received no representation as the principal theme of any debate, while religious, political, identity-, and conflict-oriented themes accounted for all 77 debates.

6.4 Theoretical Interpretation

These patterns can be interpreted through the agenda-setting framework outlined in Section 3. McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated that media salience is closely tied to issue salience; applied to this content analysis, the theory suggests that religion and politics occupied a comparatively prominent position within the sampled media agenda because they recurred frequently, while economy, unemployment, and health were effectively invisible within that same sampled agenda. This is, specifically, an interpretation of the media agenda: no audience data were collected in this study, and the findings therefore cannot be used to infer that audiences regarded religion or politics as more important as a result of viewing these programmes.

The comparison between channels similarly reflects both convergence and divergence. Times Now's sampled debates were more heavily weighted toward religion (46.0%) than Republic World's (29.6%), yet the overall hierarchy of themes was broadly similar across both channels: religion first, politics second, and environment third, with economy, unemployment, and health absent from both samples. This convergence may indicate that the two channels shared certain thematic priorities during the observation period; however, given that the data are drawn from a single month and two channels, this pattern cannot be taken as evidence of a broader or more durable trend across Indian television news generally.

6.5 Interpreting the Absence of Economy, Unemployment, and Health

The absence of economy, unemployment, and health from the sampled debates warrants cautious interpretation. This finding should be read narrowly: it indicates that these three themes were absent from the selected sample of 77 debates during the specific one-month observation period studied here. It should not be read as evidence that Republic World or Times Now generally disregard these issues, nor as evidence that either channel deliberately excluded them from coverage. The study's scope is limited to a defined set of prime-time debate programmes over a single month, identified through taglines and captions rather than complete transcripts, and this scope does not support broader claims about either channel's overall editorial priorities.

This finding must also be distinguished from any claim about the accuracy, quality, or fairness of debate content. Prior research has drawn attention to the growing prominence of opinion and “views”-oriented content in Indian television news (Devi, 2019), and this literature provides useful context for interpreting the present findings. However, the present analysis examined only the themes indicated in debate taglines and captions; it did not examine factual claims, emotional language, misinformation, or the arguments advanced by participants. The differences in thematic visibility reported here therefore indicate differences in the sampled prime-time agenda, and should not be read as evidence of bias, misinformation, or post-truth communication. Investigating those questions would require future research based on complete debate transcripts, examining how themes were discussed and framed rather than simply which themes were selected.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

Observation period. The study covers a single one-month period (7 October to 7 November 2022). Thematic priorities in prime-time debate programming can shift in response to unfolding news events, and a one-month sample cannot be assumed to represent the thematic priorities of either channel outside this specific window.

Channel scope. The study is limited to two English-language channels, Republic World and Times Now. It does not include Hindi-language, regional-language, or other English-language news channels, and the findings should not be generalised to Indian television news as a whole.

Data source. Debates were identified and retrieved from the official YouTube channels of Republic World and Times Now rather than from original broadcast recordings. While these channels are the primary official distribution point for full-length episodes, any discrepancy between YouTube uploads and original broadcast content (for example, omitted segments) could not be independently verified.

Coding basis. Thematic classification was based on debate taglines and captions rather than complete transcripts. This approach captures the principal theme as framed by the broadcaster but may understate debates that substantively addressed more than one theme, since each debate was assigned to a single dominant category.

Coder reliability. All coding was conducted by a single researcher, and no intercoder reliability check was performed. This limits the extent to which the consistency of category assignment, particularly for taglines referencing more than one theme, can be independently verified.

Absence of audience-level data. The study analyses the media agenda only. No data on audience viewership, perception, or response were collected, and the findings therefore cannot support claims about audience effects, public opinion, or the real-world impact of the sampled debates.

These limitations do not undermine the value of the study as an initial, systematic comparison of thematic priorities on two major English-language prime-time debate programmes; they do, however, define the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the thematic priorities of 77 prime-time debates broadcast on Republic World and Times Now over a one-month period, from 7 October to 7 November 2022, based on the themes indicated in each debate's tagline and caption. Religion was the most frequently occurring theme in the combined sample (40.3%), followed by politics (20.8%) and environment (11.7%). Religion was the leading theme on both channels individually, though it accounted for a considerably larger share of Times Now's sampled debates (46.0%) than of Republic World's (29.6%). Economy, unemployment, and health did not appear as the principal theme of any sampled debate on either channel during the one-month observation period.

These findings address the study's three research questions. In response to RQ1, religion, politics, and environment were the three most prominent themes in the sampled agenda. In response to RQ2, the two channels shared a broadly similar thematic hierarchy but differed most noticeably in the relative weight given to religion and to Pakistan-related debates. In response to RQ3, socio-economic and public-interest themes (economy, unemployment, health) received no representation as a principal theme in the sampled agenda, in marked contrast to the religious, political, identity-, and conflict-oriented themes that accounted for the entire sample.

These results reflect the thematic priorities observed within the specific debate programmes, channels, and one-month period sampled in this study. They should not be read as evidence of an overall disregard for other issues, nor as evidence of deliberate editorial bias, on the part of either channel. Because the study is limited to two channels, a one-month observation period, single-coder classification, and thematic frequency rather than full debate content (see Section 7), it does not indicate how the sampled issues were discussed, which perspectives were foregrounded within individual debates, or how audiences responded to the programmes. Future research extending the observation period, including a wider range of channels and languages, employing multiple coders with a formal intercoder reliability check, and analysing complete debate transcripts would help to build on the thematic patterns identified here and to examine how the dominant themes identified in this study were actually framed and discussed on air...

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