

TELEVISION COVERAGE OF
EARTHQUAKE: SHARING THE
VIEWERS' PERSPECTIVE

Study Authored By
GUJARAT VIEWERS' FORUM

Minal Hazarika
Jahnvi Vyas
Ranchod Bhai
Sayra Khan

DELHI VIEWERS' FORUM

Estelle Desai
Madhu Prasad

CENTRE FOR ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH

Meeta Parti, Akhila Sivadas

Background

The earthquake of 26th January devastated many parts of Gujarat. People all over India were united by their concern for those who suffered the impact of the quake. At this time, everybody was glued to their TV sets wanting to know about all that had happened. People outside Gujarat felt closer to the tragedy through TV images and reports in the print media. But for the people of Gujarat perhaps it was the only source to know what was happening. Therefore, Ahmedabad Viewers' Forum conducted this audience feedback study to ascertain viewer response on the coverage of earthquake by television.

Objectives

This Audience Feedback study focussed on three objectives.

Firstly, we sought an assessment of the **quality of coverage**. Besides rating the coverage as good, not consistently good and disappointing we also sought an explanation as to why a particular rating was given. In the same category of questions, we also tried to assess whether the coverage was sensitive to the victims, realistic, balanced and finally honest and impartial.

The second objective was to gauge the **impact of the coverage** on the viewers. Besides assessing the impact on their anxiety level we also made an effort to examine whether any positive effects also emerged. Did it strengthen their coping abilities, were help-lines useful and did it generate the sense of hope that even a disaster of such magnitude can be overcome with the right kind of collective will and determination?

The third was to ascertain how viewers perceived the **role of television media**. Do they feel more confident that television can play a useful role in natural disasters? Did they at any point of time feel that media ethics were being compromised with and channels got caught in their own competitive battle and in this cross-fire the viewer mattered less and the specific coverage mattered more?

Methodology

The Viewers Forum members in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar were asked to give an extensive feedback on some important aspects of media coverage of the earthquake. This feedback was later collated, processed and analyzed by the Viewers' Forum and the Centre for Advocacy and Research.

Demographic Profile

A group of forty two respondents representing a cross section of men and women participated in an in-depth individual audience feedback exercise. Among these respondents, the age differed from early 20s to over 60. But more than this diversity, we tried to get feedback from people who were involved in a range of activities such as students, professionals, social activist, housewives, academicians and retired people.

These were not only from different socio-economical groups but also had different associations with the earthquake. One of them ran for help as her house fell, some witnessed buildings collapsing just in front of them, some felt a terrible tremor, some didn't feel much because they were out on the ground but still shiver at the mention of the word and there were some (from Gandhinagar) who just felt the tremor but suffered no physical loss.

FINDINGS

Quality of coverage

When asked to rate the coverage it is interesting that we got **a hung verdict with a fairly similar proportion of people holding extreme views.**

One sizeable section pronounced it as **good and innovative coverage** while another section which was marginally lesser in the number of respondents found it **sensational and disappointing.** This included both men and women and while all men found the quality of coverage satisfactory, among women the older group was more supportive of the efforts made by the channels.

Even more significant were an equally large number of respondents who had taken a more mixed view about the quality of coverage. In their conception **it was good to begin with but later it became sensational and lacked direction.** However what makes this exercise worthwhile are the criteria they applied for their individual rating.

What made it good?

When asked to define "good" the range of highly subjective criteria places **a tremendous responsibility on the media in terms of what is expected out of it in such a difficult and challenging situation.** Some of the responses clearly reveal the following.

- **When everything failed, all communication virtually broke down and a state of confusion and chaos prevailed television played a very important role in keeping the affected people going.**
- It was also rated as work that was a result of **high technical and professional standards.**
- The decision by the media to underplay the scale of devastation was viewed as an exercise of **a responsible role.**
- **In such a situation, access to multiple channels was seen as important as each channel they felt had different strengths and limitations.** It is significant that many individuals perceived the utility of the channel in similar ways.

One channel, they stated, had *no bias* and did an *extensive coverage* of quake affected areas. In the case of another channel what stood out was that it proved *timely in its coverage* and was *consistently supported by good visuals*. Yet another channel was found very effective in the manner in which it *encouraged a public debate and discussions* through lively studio-based interaction with a cross-section of people.

In two cases, the channels created a very deep impression by capturing the earthquake live and relaying unedited or *as-it-happened footage*. They said that during the initial phase the "scenes of hanging poles and towers was unimaginable" and these visuals made a very deep impact on them.

It "wasn't entirely good"

When it came to a "not entirely good" response, the feedback, coming from both men and women though largely older ones, was **shaped by one common perception. What seemed disappointing to the viewers about the coverage was the fact that what begun as a very promising coverage could not be sustained.**

The lack of consistency, with channels succumbing to different kinds of pressures, affected the quality of coverage. This could be the government in the case of the official channels or the "competition of rival channels" in the case of the satellite channels. Competition finally forced them to become sensational in their news presentation and even biased towards political parties, individuals etc.

But the respondents who were extremely critical about the coverage were largely men and in particular younger men. They attributed the poor quality of coverage to sensationalism and an inability to go beyond the superficial aspects of the disaster.

So sensational was the coverage that some of the images even appeared to the respondent as "contrived" to suit a television news story rather than a genuine pursuit of a story. One

of the respondents gave an instance where one of the leading Channels showed their camera team following an NRI who was looking for his family. She found the whole story "unconvincing and unrealistic" as if they were trying to craft a human-interest story, not spontaneously, but as if it had been re-enacted for the benefit of their camera".

Moreover, what made it sensational was the fact that all the gory images of collapsed buildings, people buried under the debris and dead bodies were endlessly and repeatedly telecast as though the responsibility of the media began and ended there. In fact, with the passage of time this just kept worsening. The coverage was found to be so futile that many of the respondents who fell in this category claimed that they even stopped watching television news after four days.

They felt that despite the channel's claim about being focussing on the disaster, making it often the major news of the different bulletins, **no effort was made by the channels to cover important areas and parts of the State.** It was easier to go on using the same footage and then based on this footage shift the focus of the coverage to more manageable aspects such as all the related political developments and goings-on.

WAS THE COVERAGE VICTIM-FRIENDLY?

An overwhelming view was that channels were sensitive while handling the victims of the quake. To the people who were affirmative in their response many elements stood out.

This included a decisive yes when it came to the channel of their choice. In other instances **it was felt that the mere act of reaching out to people and conveying their individual agony and trauma to the world at large was by itself a very important service** that the media performed. Moreover when all this individual saga got converted into some meaningful action and the quake-affected people were actually rescued, helped and supported this "consoled" them and made it seem surmountable. **It was due to the manner in which the media highlighted the plight of the affected people that some targeted and coordinated relief work could take place.**

On some occasions when the media decided to mediate between the government and the affected people and handled the conflict sensitively exerting the right pressure on the government, compelling the latter to give an explanation or clarify their position, then it was very "comforting" for the viewers.

Moreover even public service messages by celebrities extending solidarity to quake victims, advising them not to panic was very reassuring for them. It is in this connection, they felt, that some of the channels dedicated to spiritual and religious discourses could connect better with viewers when it came to addressing people's morale or mental stress etc.

To the small but significant respondent who did not feel that the coverage was victim-friendly **what stood out in the whole process of telling a human interest story was the "clinical precision" of the journalists.** They seemed to be involved in getting an interview conducted, weaving it into a news story and getting trapped in an "overkill" or "saturation" process of telling the same story over and over again. **Moreover once the competition started growing the required extent of sensitivity began to decline.**

WAS THE COVERAGE REALISTIC?

To nearly two-thirds of the respondents the answer to this question was evident and not disputable in any way. **Given the nature of the medium how can it be anything but real they wondered. In addition, the fact that the channels made the quake victims the centre of the story and began to broadcast live and direct testimonies of people affected by the quake made the whole event realistic and "true to life".**

It was this **element of instant communication** -at the level of the physical destruction and all the debris it created and the extent of human loss and tragedy it left in its trail- that not only **made the coverage so realistic but also created tremendous recall and a personalized association.** Many respondents claimed that more than any physical experience they had with the earthquake what they **suffered was mental stress** and trauma, not necessarily **triggered off but reinforced by the coverage.**

CAN THE COVERAGE BE VIEWED AS HONEST, IMPARTIAL AND BALANCED?

Again we found a highly divided perception to this question. To the slightly larger group of respondents, consisting of both men and women and to a great extent the older respondents felt that their impartiality or neutrality or balance was much more on this occasion than on any previous issue or event that they had covered. What was significant about their neutrality was **that when the government seemed unprepared the media exposed their unprepared state of mind and made the government far more conscious of the urgency** of the situation and accountable for immediate relief operations. Secondly by **constantly featuring the ordinary people their grit, courage and ability to confront pain and anguish they ensured that the coverage was balanced and pro-people.**

But to an equally large number of **respondents** who were **not entirely sure about their impartiality what made the situation difficult was when the channels had to assess the relief operations.** There was no consistency in their stand about whether the government was helpful, prepared or not. This inconsistency got reflected in figures as well as in the kind of representation that came through.

Moreover, it was also felt that there was a biased selection of areas and organisations that got covered. While the high-rise buildings of Ahmedabad where the middle class resides got a lot of coverage, many remote villages of Kutch never got the same importance. Many organizations that they were aware of doing very

extensive relief work also never got covered. Moreover under the pressure of competition it was felt that many "half-baked stories" were being put out with each channel "eager to stay ahead of each other".

This representation of some towns like Bachau and Kutch resulted in an uneven distribution of relief. Media also gave too much importance to relief given by well-known organisations or international agencies. They completely ignored the contribution from local people, local NGOs, ordinary people who contributed to the relief work.

IMPACT OF THE COVERAGE

Did it impact the anxiety-level? Did television simultaneously help you to address or cope with it?

Nearly 90% of the respondents found that they had been adversely affected by the sheer power of the medium. To add to the sheer effect of visuals was the use of other dramatic elements like the background music, which also contributed to the sense of terror they felt.

Sections like children, women and old people claimed that they had been even more **severely affected**. The images were so traumatic that many of the respondents and their families lost sleep, became victims of mental stress and found themselves completely bereft of any sense of self-confidence and courage.

Some respondents shared the information that not being able to cope with the onslaught of images they are now seeking help in the form of counseling from mental health professionals.

Another respondent who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy found herself reacting very adversely to the repeated images on television and even went into premature labour pain.

The viewers living with disability and in particular visual impairment felt another sense of desolation with some of it further reinforced by what was happening to individuals that mattered like their own children

In fact the initial coverage made such a deep impact that every little noise or rumbling would arouse the worst kind of fear and panic. Some people they claimed whom they knew had even been driven to desperate acts like suicide. **So strong was the impact that even when the media began to cover the response to the quake in the form of relief operations, showed hordes of volunteers prepared to support the rehabilitation work, it did not help the victim. It did not entirely address the sense of hopelessness and despair that had got ingrained in their minds.**

It is in this context that a large section of people felt that the quality of coverage was not entirely commendable. They questioned the purpose of unnecessary repetition of images of destruction and death.

As far as **helping people to cope with the tragedy** is concerned the respondents felt that in some sense the television **coverage contributed** to the process.

- With everyone watching the television and accessing the coverage, **it generated some sense of unity and a feeling of togetherness. The public service messages** particularly by celebrities like Shaktimaan on DD2 really did help and in particular children. (*TV par Shaktimaan dwara bachoo ko satavna dene ka paryatna bahut fayademand raha, isse bachoo ko bahut sahara mila*). The respondent also shared that Mukesh Khanna (Shaktimaan) visited several districts of Gujarat and consoled children in fear.

Emphasising this point one respondent felt that even though the official channel was not as aggressive in their news dissemination.

- **Coverage of people having been rescued** from the debris and **human-interest stories dealing with the indomitable spirit and heroism of common people** turned out to be **a great source of hope and encouraged people to recover their human spirits.**
- **The presence of experts** and placing the issue in the scientific context of natural disasters **helped to look at the event more objectively.** The constant flow of news report about aid and assistance coming from different parts of the world restored their "faith in humanity". Moreover when television channels decided to adopt villages and assist in the rehabilitation effort this changed their impressions about the involvement of media. Commenting this one respondent said that "we felt very good when we learnt that one of the leading channel had adopted a few villages"

On the help-line service that the channel offered, although most respondents found the idea useful, not many could speak about it in very concrete terms as they did not actually use the service. The few people who had tried said that they could not "get through". Certainly however the idea was appreciated and some even knew of people who had benefited from it. Finally **what counted was not whether it worked or not but the fact that the channels cared and did do their bit to bring people together.**

However, when it came to groups like **children**, it was observed that **none of the coping processes cited above has helped them in any way.** They continue to be so withdrawn and frightened that a special effort needs to be made to help them to cope with the trauma. Talking about this one respondent narrated how in a camp she " found

a group of 15 children belonging to Bhuj, all between the age of 7 and 12, who looked unusually quiet, withdrawn and anxious. Constantly clinging to their mothers, the only thought they would express was asking their mothers about what will happen to them now!"

It was stressed that many more stories of courage should have been simultaneously aired to counter all the traumatic influences that the coverage had, particularly on the more vulnerable sections.

ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF TELEVISION NEWS CHANNELS

To the section that felt satisfied by what television was seeking to do, there was no doubt that it made a big difference. In fact, according to this group of respondents, people were totally dependent on television to constantly know and get updated about the situation. **The sheer swiftness with which information was sent to different parts of the country and world, the aggressive way in which they projected the event and the subsequent help and support this evoked from different quarters, all revealed the tremendous influence** this coverage had. This was particularly evident on the section of people who were not personally affected but were deeply moved by what they saw and heard.

However, to the section that was critical about the quality of coverage, **where the television channels let them down was their inability to take on the powerful leaders and ensure that relief work proceeded under constant media scrutiny.** Moreover, there were many occasions when the role of **media was put to test** and on these occasions media did not entirely rise to it.

On one occasion, the Gujarat Chief Minister categorically informed people about the possibility of fresh earthquakes in the next forty-eight hours and cautioned against stepping into their homes. At this point of time when people were still in the grips of panic and anxiety, it was necessary for the media to step in and **ensure that an expert reinterpreted this information or warning to the viewer.**

Recommendations:

The viewers expect **timely and in depth coverage.**

The coverage should be **highly representative** comprising of different areas and population groups and communities.

The coverage should not only be victim-centred but should also **service the information needs of the affected.** The channels should understand that such concentrated coverage of a human tragedy of this magnitude which could lead to all kinds of anxieties needs to be balanced with other kinds of programming intervention. This should help people to

view the event with greater objectivity and to raise a sense of hope and self-confidence among people. For instance experts on disaster management, counselors who should include both professionals and peer-educators or people who have learnt to cope with such disasters should be called in to educate viewers, share their experiences and if possible counsel them to cope with the event.

The television **reporters** should be **given professional training** for covering such disasters.

Statutory warning should be given before images of such disasters are shown. Especially, unsupervised watching should be discouraged.

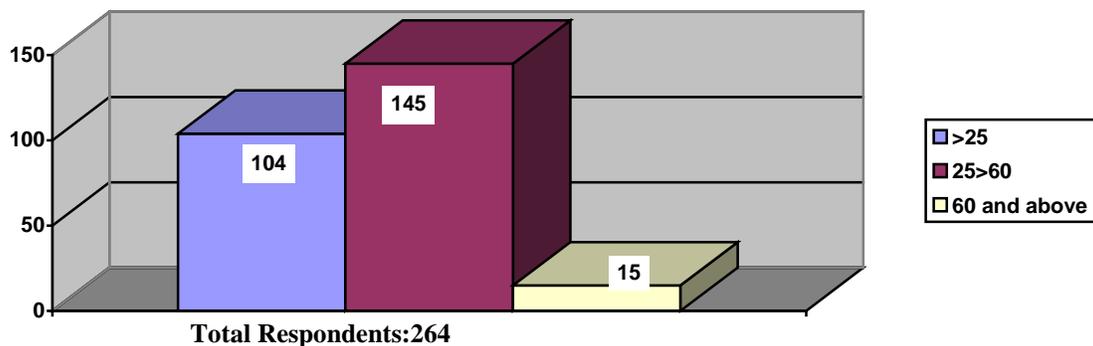
During the process of coverage, TV channels should take the viewers into confidence about the kind of challenges and constraints that they face in the coverage of such events. Such transparency alone will help to rid viewers of the feeling that media is too powerful an institution for ordinary people to address and if necessary even correct.

PART II BASELINE SURVEY

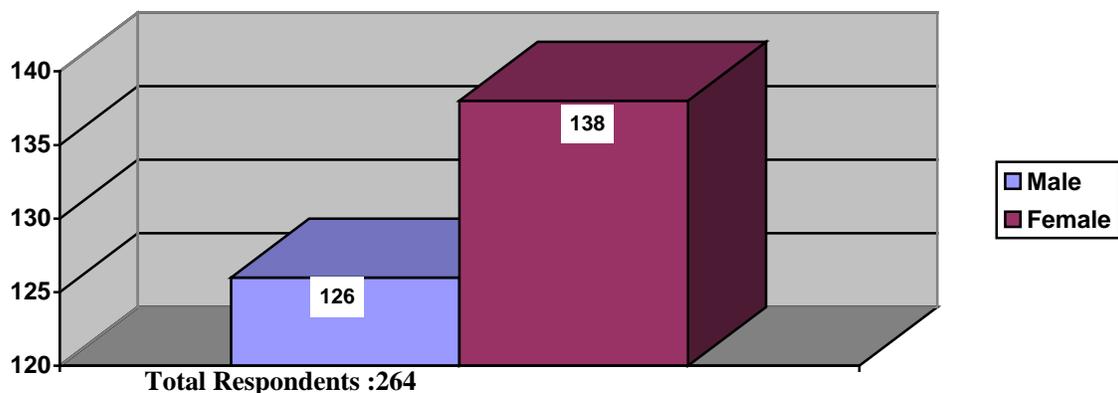
Alongside the qualitative response study, a **questionnaire survey** too was conducted in the quake-affected cities of Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar. The objective of this was to generate a **baseline reference on the media habits**, particularly media preferences, of the residents.

Methodology: The questionnaire was distributed to a diverse group in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar. Another method used was that of structured interview where the same questionnaire was used as the interview schedule. Often this method was resorted to access respondents on telephone. In the process, some respondents from Rajkot and Jamnagar too were included. Response from the visually impaired people were recorded on a tape recorder and later transcribed on to the questionnaire form.

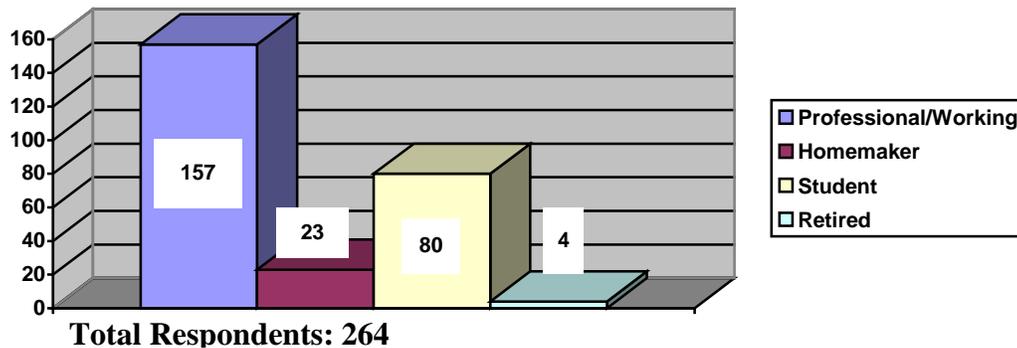
Sample: The sample for this quantitative survey consisted of **264 respondents**. This consisted of a nearly equal mix of both young and middle aged people. While 104 were young men and women below 25 years of age, a sizeable number belonged to middle aged people. Also a small but significant number constituted of senior citizens.



Gender representation in the sample was equitable.



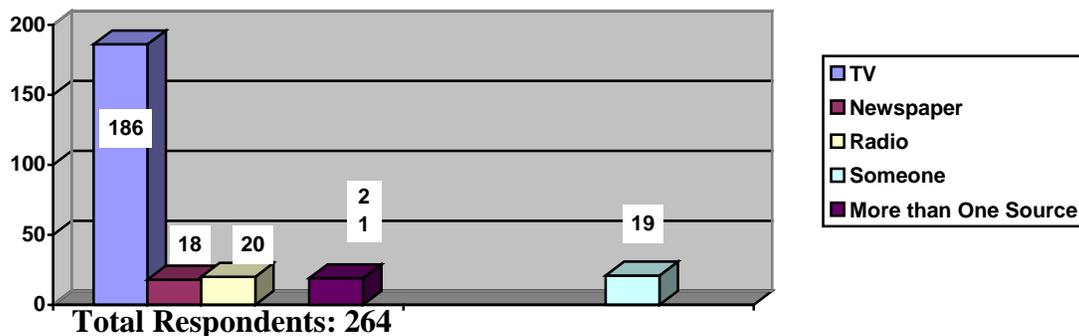
Among the 264 respondents interviewed for the survey, 157 were working. These consisted of professionals, academicians, businesspersons and social workers as well as housemaids, mason, vegetable vendors, small shop owners and those doing petty jobs for their living. Homemakers constituted a small part of the sample. Students from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic categories formed a sizeable and a significant part of the sample. 20 respondents were visually impaired.



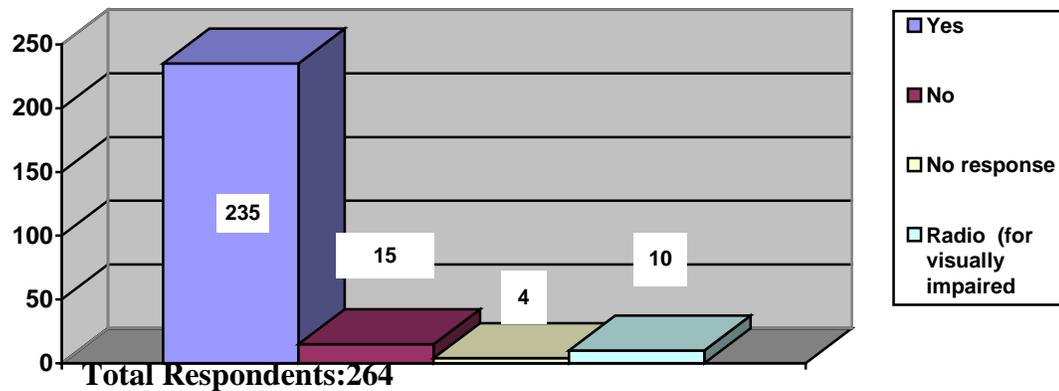
KEY FINDINGS

HOW DID YOU LEARN ABOUT THE EPICENTRE AND SCALE OF THE QUAKE?

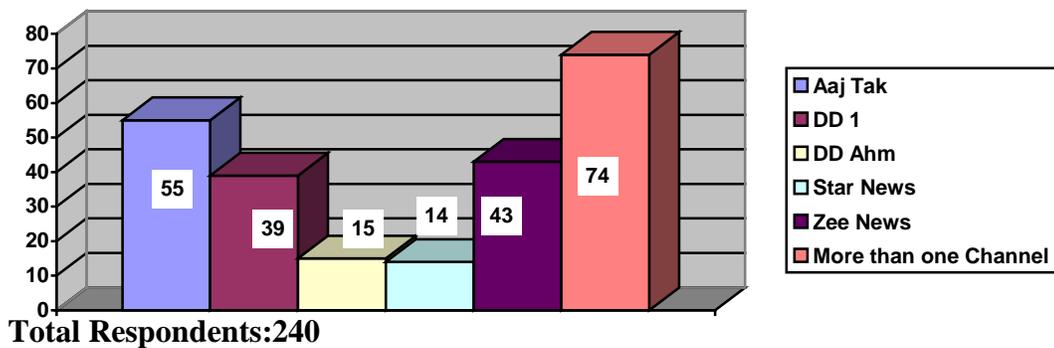
- 70% of the respondents (i.e. 186 out of 264) learnt about the epicentre and scale of the earthquake from TV. Amongst all other sources of information, personal network was cited and was way behind with a mere 7%.



- 85% or an all high of 235 out of 264 respondents stated that to learn about earthquake related news, TV was their first **choice of medium**. 10 out of 20 visually impaired people used radio to get information on what was happening around them.

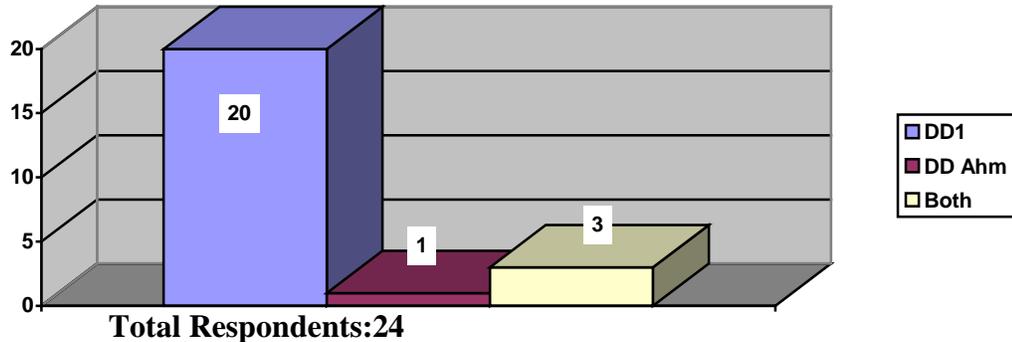


WHICH CHANNEL DID YOU ACCESS FOR UPDATE ON EARTHQUAKE: C & S HOUSEHOLDS



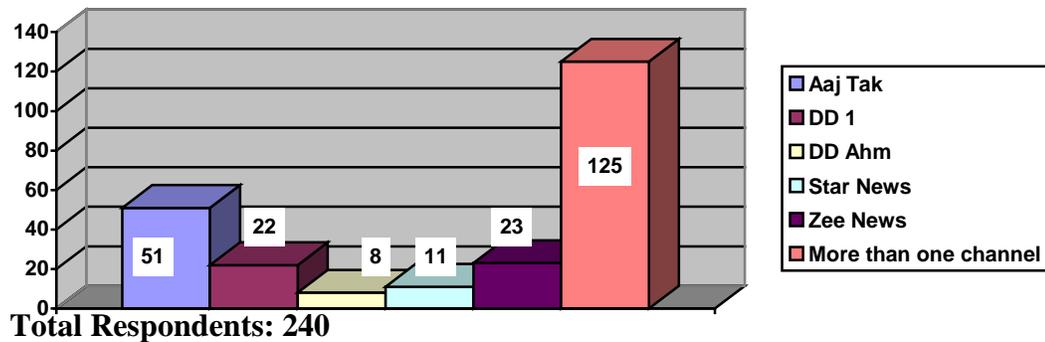
- When asked which channel did they switched on to get an updated version of the earthquake, among the cable owning households, there were 166 respondents out of 240 who were **committed to a single news channel** as against 74 who accessed more than one news channel. Among respondents committed to a single channel, Aaj Tak had a clear lead with 55 out of 166 (33%) citing it. It was followed by Zee (43 votes), and DD 1 (39 votes). Among the respondents who opted for more than one channel, BBC and CNN also featured in their responses.

WHICH CHANNEL DID YOU ACCESS FOR UPDATE ON EARTHQUAKE: DD HOUSEHOLDS



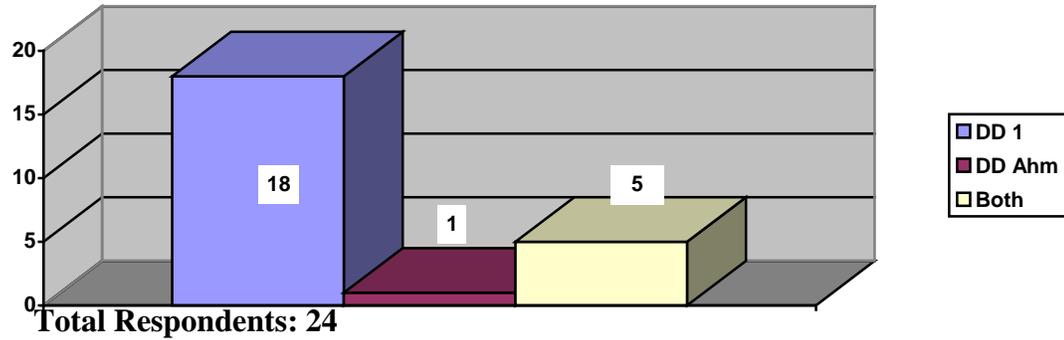
Among the Non-cable households, DD 1 was the first choice with more than 80% accessing it.

WHICH CHANNEL DID YOU WATCH CONSISTENTLY THROUGH OUT THE FORTNIGHT: C & S HOUSEHOLDS



- It is interesting that number of respondents who **accessed more than one channel** went up by almost 40% during the fortnight with Zee and DD losing almost half their audiences to a multiple news channel viewer. Aaj Tak was able to maintain its viewer's loyalty.
- Among the non-cable households, there wasn't much change.

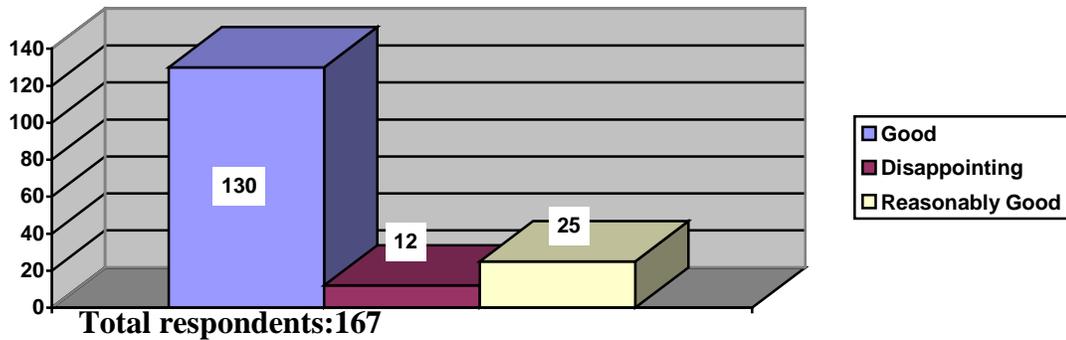
DD Households



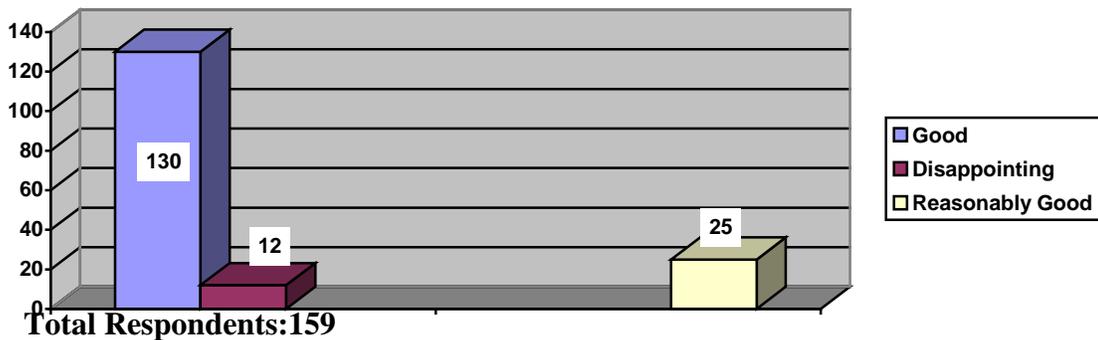
HOW WOULD YOU ASSESS THE QUALITY OF COVERAGE?

- When asked to rate the quality of coverage as 'good', 'reasonably good' and 'disappointing', over 80% of the respondents found the overall coverage 'good'. The coverage generally was disappointing to only a negligible proportion of the respondents.

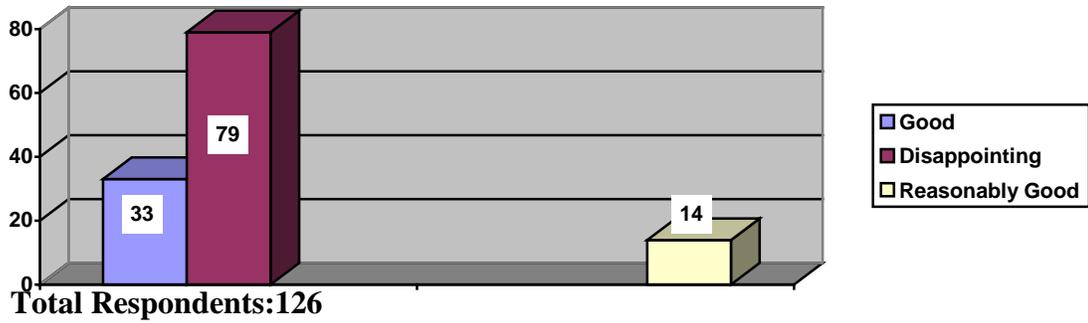
AAJ TAK



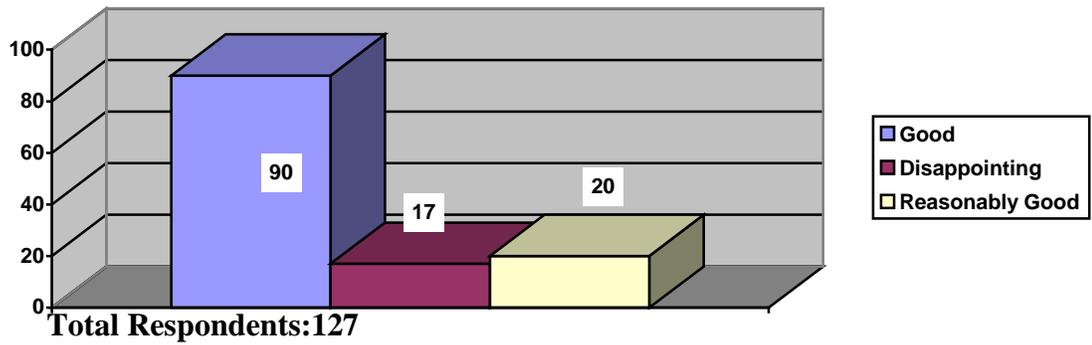
DD 1



DD AHMEDABAD



STAR NEWS



ZEE NEWS

