

YouTube influencers versus mainstream media: The new equations of political interviewing

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Abstract: There has been slow but growing concern over the phenomenon of politicians doing interviews with influencers in place of with traditionally trained journalists and what that means for the future of democratic accountability. In this work, we created and examined a sample of 238 politician interviews on YouTube to profile which politicians find this approach useful, and how this impacts the overall mainstream media approach to political interviewing. We find that while influencers are clearly entering politics to stay and are massively out-performing mainstream media channels in terms of viewership for political content, it is only the already widely popular politicians can hope to score an interview with highly followed influencers, and that the actual quality of the interview still matters very significantly as a predictor of viewership. In conclusion, while social media influencers are here to stay as political interviewers and will continue to eat away at the work of professional journalists or policy experts, content still matters as interviews that appear staged or disingenuous fail to make an impact even with the cover of a powerful influencer.

Keywords: Social Media, YouTube, Influencers, India

Citation: Raghavan, D., Pal, J. (2025) “**YouTube influencers versus mainstream media: The new equations of political interviewing**”. Online at <https://joyojeet.people.si.umich.edu/politicalinterviews.pdf>

Introduction

In the run up to the 2014 general elections in India, one element of Narendra Modi’s outreach strategy was glaringly obvious, yet new enough that political observers were not sure what to make of it. Modi had stopped speaking to journalists, especially political journalists and interviewers who had made careers out of cross-questioning politicians on mainstream media. Modi’s now long-standing television [interview fiasco with Karan Thapar](#) in 2007 had ensured that he would never again find himself fumbling with words and looking cornered on screen. Modi’s

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move to communicate primarily, and often solely, on social media has since become a standard operating procedure for politicians across parties and states. While heads of political parties and major parliamentary seat candidates have dived into social media as their primary outlet in a significant way, even candidates standing for smaller state races have started seeking out ways of platform-based outreach. Modi also did what was probably the precursor to the influencer interview when in 2012 he did [a G+ interview](#) with action film star Ajay Devgun. By the end of Modi’s first tenure as prime minister, he had upped the ante with what would be one of his most famous celebrity engagements, [an interview](#) with another action movie star – Akshay Kumar.

But what Modi has started has extended well beyond India. Several major politicians, particularly those who take relatively populist stances, have moved to social media as a primary, and sometimes sole, space of engagement. This was best seen in the 2024 US Presidential Election in which the majority of candidates for the Republican primaries announced their candidacies on social media or conducted their interviews with influencers and podcasters on YouTube, including most significantly, the eventual winner Donald Trump himself. Influencers offer a range of benefits to politicians – they bring them access to new audiences in highly polarized political environments in which the leaning of existing channels is already well known, they allow politicians to present themselves in relatively benign and humanized ways in a relaxed environment, unlike a combative journalist interview, and last, they are not trained to do political interviews – they may neither have the skill to push a politician nor the policy knowledge that is necessary to grill a politician on air.

Methodology

To map the ecology of political interviews on YouTube, we analyzed 238 interviews with 74 politicians on 20 channels that took place one year in advance of the May 2024 elections. We sorted YouTube channels into four categories, listed in the table below, and selected five channels from each category that had conducted political interviews. Mainstream media refers to television news channels that post content on YouTube. Digital news refers to exclusively digital media channels. Influencers are individuals on YouTube whose main content is not political or news-related. Independent journalist channels are centered around individual journalists or anchors that are independent. The findings we present here are based on this sampling, consequently a larger sample with more news and influencer channels may present different findings, ours are within the context of these channels.

Mainstream Media	Digital News	Influencers	Independent Journalists
Aaj Tak, News18, NDTV, etc.	Mojo Story, Lallantop, etc.	Beer Biceps, Raj Shamani, Vivek Bindra, etc.	Ravish Kumar, Ajit Anjum, etc.

Table 1: Description of channel types. A link to the full list is available [here](#).

Findings

We briefly describe our findings with accompanying visualizations to help make sense of them. Figure 1 shows the distribution of interviews, sorted by the share of interviews of opposition politicians. We see a significant relationship between access to YouTube influencers and engagement largely with the ruling alliance. Of all the major influencers who interviewed 5 or more politicians in the 2024 campaign, we see that only Samdish Bhatia gets more opposition politicians, whereas the others, especially those with massive online reach like Technical Guruji or Vivek Bindra got only ruling party politicians on their platforms.

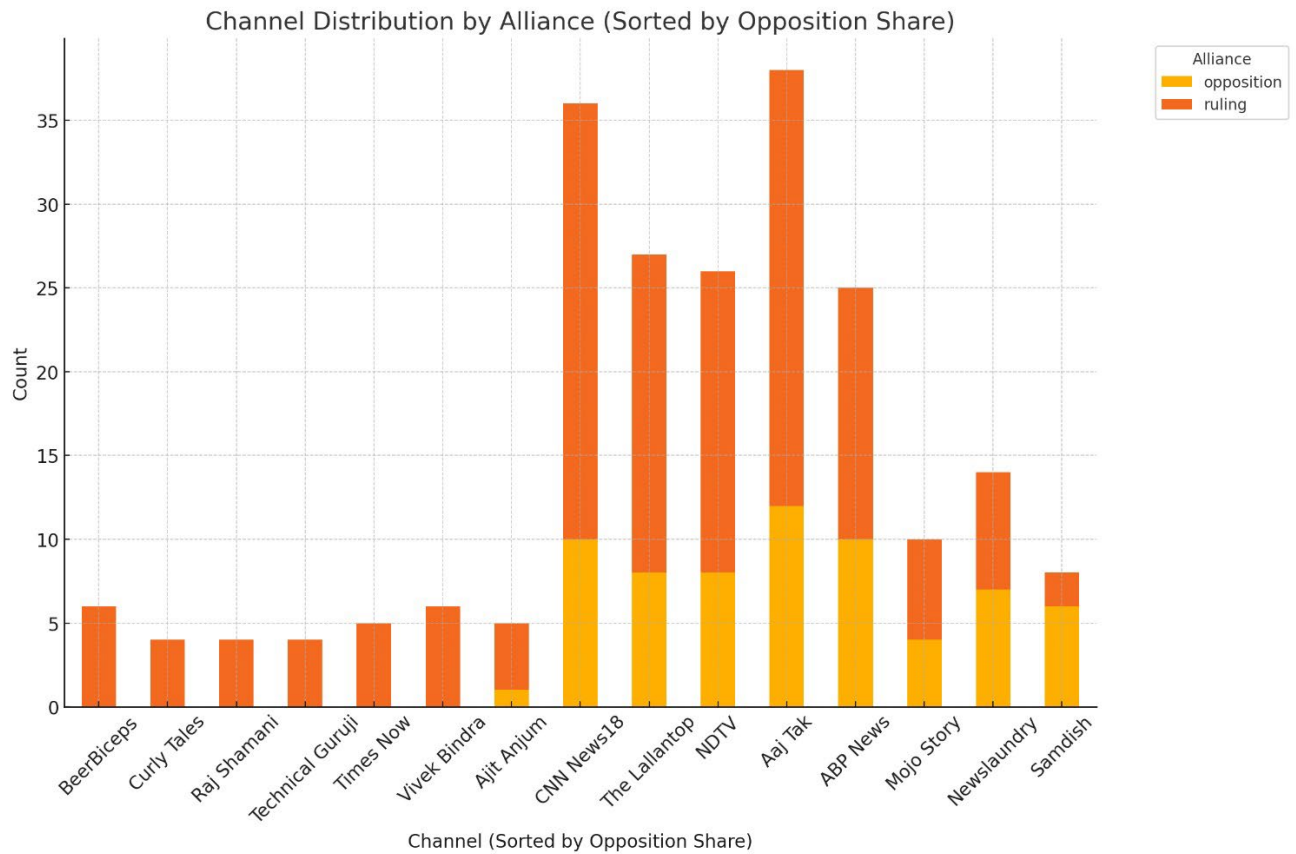


Figure 1: A histogram depicting the distribution of YouTube interviews on selected channels, sorted by the share of videos where an INDIA alliance politician was interviewed. Chi-square value of 24.72 and p-value = 0.037 indicate that the relationship between alliance and channel is statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level.

In figure 2, each dot is an instance of a YouTube interview of a politician. We see a fairly even spread of red dots (influencer interviews) throughout the entire year, and a spike in the green and blue dots (digital and mainstream news interviews) towards the end of the year, at the peak of the campaign cycle.

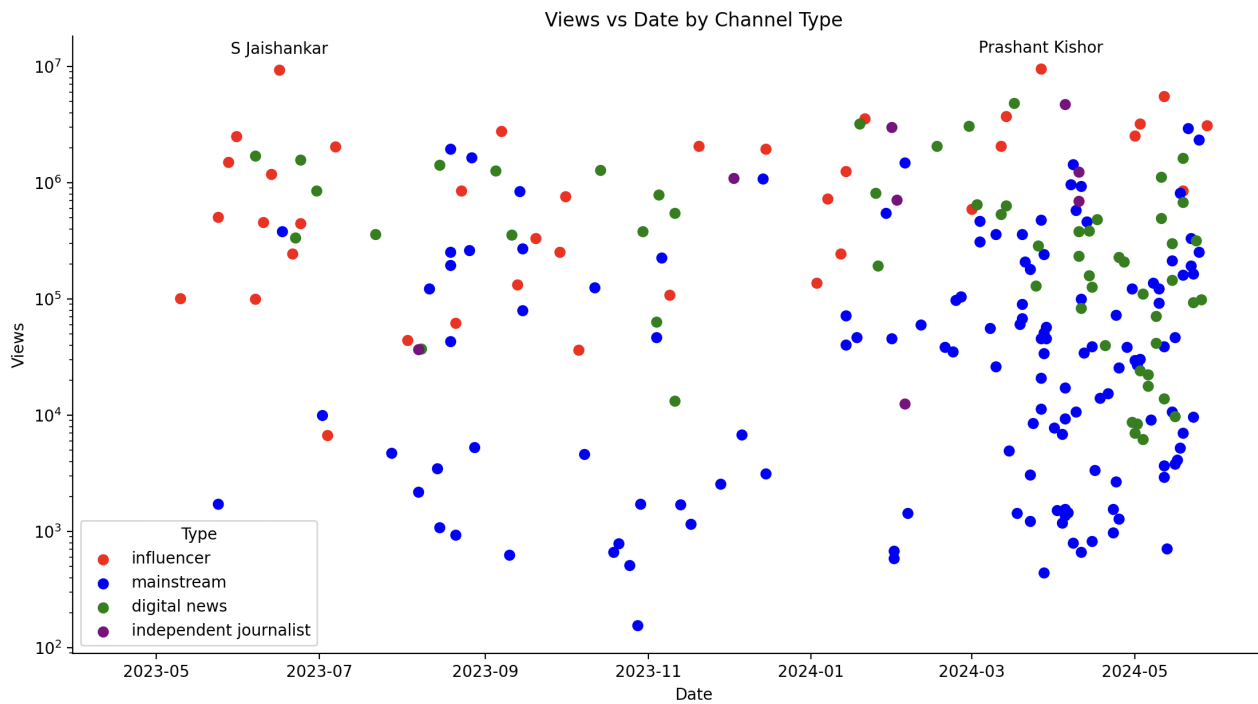


Figure 2: The views of 238 YouTube interviews on selected channels in the year before the 2024 election, color coded by channel type.

There are two important inferences to derive here – first, while interviews of politicians with professional journalists on digital or mainstream news channels are more likely to appear when they are more “newsworthy” – ie towards the end of a campaign cycle, influencer interviews occur more consistently throughout the year. In other words, regular outreach, which does the slower work of brand building, happens around the year, whereas the peak work of journalist-engaged interviews tends to happen when the campaign catches speed. It is also likely that this is the time that news channels have the greatest incentive to cover elections and are willing to put resources such as the time of their anchors and production teams towards the work of political interviews.

To understand which strategy pays off the most, we only plotted politicians who appeared in at least five separate interviews (on any channel). These, in other words, are politicians who have more aggressively taken to interviews that get posted online. We see in figure 3 below that the spread of interview timelines by politicians on various channels reflects the pattern of increasing interviews towards the end of the campaign cycle.

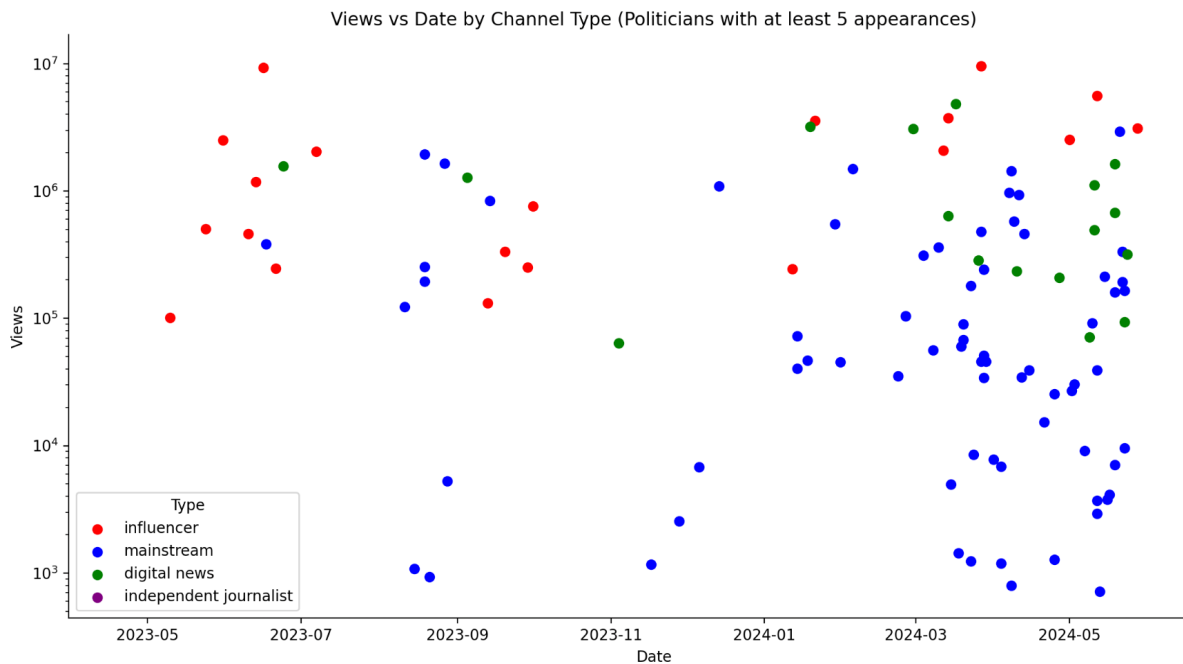


Figure 3: The views of YouTube interviews with the 17 politicians that had at least 5 YouTube interviews on the selected channels, in the year before the election. The dots are color coded by channel type.

But which channels serve the politicians best? We see in figure 4 that on average, influencers and independent journalists' channels far outperform traditional and digital media in terms of views. There are two possible explanations for this. First, the independent journalists, like digital influencers, are individuals, thus their approach to social media brand building is around personality. Consequently, these channels tend to get more engagement. Mainstream and digital news channels have thousands of videos and tend to produce a large amount of content on a daily basis. Influencers, on the other hand, have a much smaller output, but this output is heavily advertised and, on average, gets much more viewership.

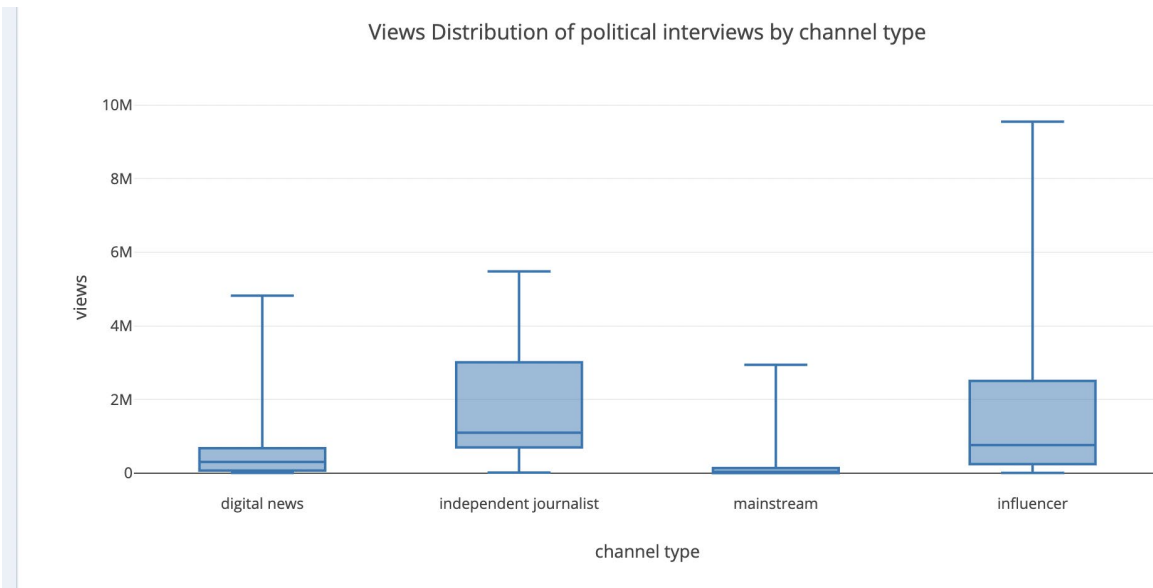


Figure 4: Box plots showing the views (in millions) distribution for interviews, by channel type.

When we break these channels up based on opposition and ruling alliance interviews, we see in the box plot (figure 5) that the median views per interview is fairly consistent between opposition and ruling alliance politicians. We found no statistically significant differences between the views received based on party alliance. In other words, the views of a video neither increase nor decrease based on whether the politician belongs to the ruling or opposition alliance.

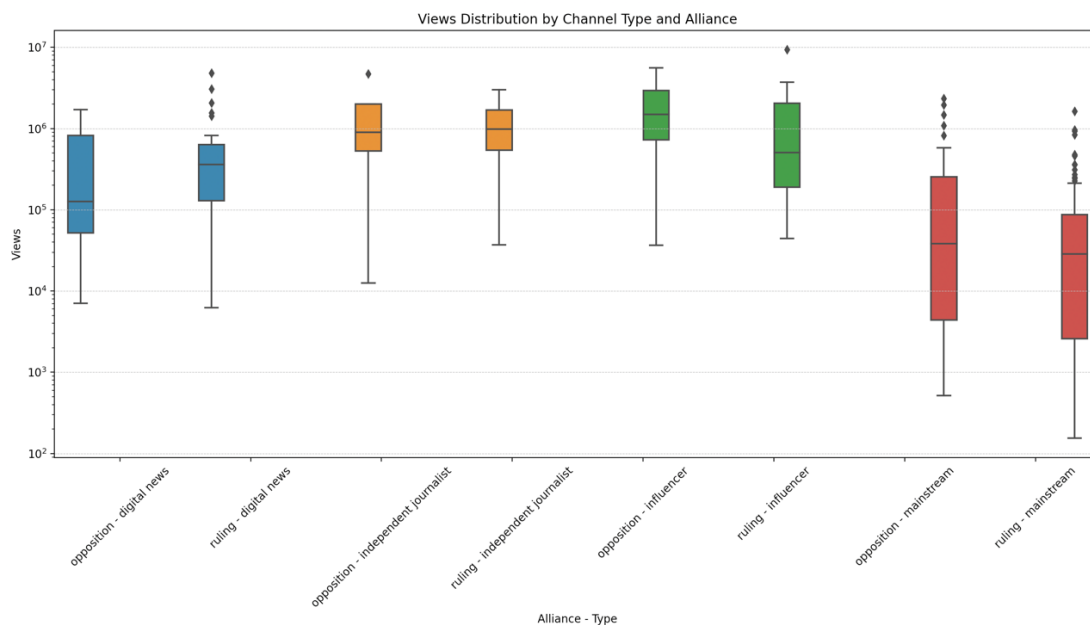


Figure 5: Box plots of the views distribution (log-scaled) of videos, organized by the alliance of the politician and the type of channel.

When we examine which channels get the most views, we find that the influencers and independent journalists consistently outperform the other categories of interviewers. Lifestyle influencer channel Curly Tales gets the highest share of median views overall, Ajit Anjum gets the most engagement among independent journalists with online channels, the Lallantop gets the highest median views per interview for digital channels, while Aaj Tak gets the highest median views for mainstream media channels.

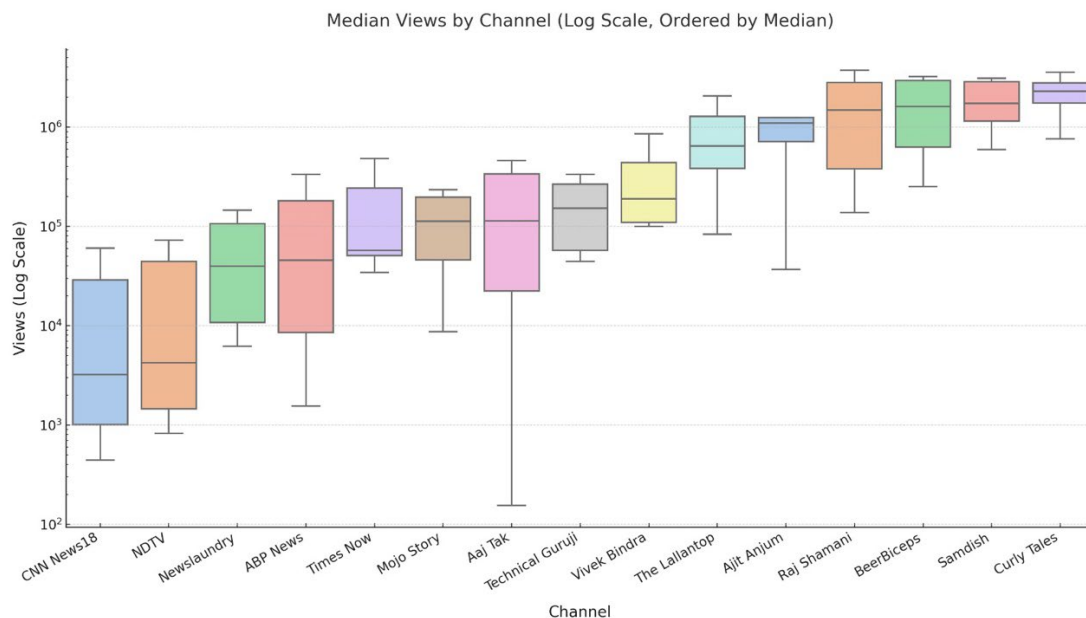


Figure 6: Box plots of the views distribution (log-scaled) of selected YouTube channels, ordered by median views. The differences are statistically significant using ANOVA.

We see one interesting pattern here, that content is still king. For instance, YouTube channel Unfiltered by Samdish has the second highest median views, but the channel has just 2 million subscribers, which is far lower than the other channels. This can be attributed to the direct style of questioning on the channel, which suggests that the interview is genuine and not staged. Samdish averaged 1.7 million views per interview with a politician, whereas in contrast, Vivek Bindra and Technical Guruji, both of whom have over 20 million subscribers on YouTube, got less than 200k views per politician interview. Both Vivek Bindra and Technical Guruji conduct what can be termed “soft” interviews in which the politician does not get questioned too aggressively.

Similarly, Ajit Anjum, whose interviews tend to be a bit more combative, is on average the most viewed independent journalist. The digital channel that gets the most views on average is Lallantop, which is partly attributable to the fact that interviews are done by the editor, Saurabh Dwivedi, who brings some star power and is also known to ask relatively difficult questions. In short, while politicians may seek out softball interviews, the evidence suggests that the more authentic interviews are the ones that get the most throughput.

For the politician, if the metric is online reach, influencers and independent journalists are clearly winners. If we combine the influencers and independent journalists and compare their throughput

to that of media houses' YouTube channels, the difference is stark. In figure 7 below, we visualized the multiplier value that politicians get when they conduct an interview with influencers or independent journalist (group 1) over mainstream and digital news media (group 2). For each politician, we divided the average number of views they got on group 2 channels by the average number of views they got on group 1 channels and created a (log-scaled) boxplot of the distribution (figure 7). We saw that on average, the same politician got nearly 10 times the number of views when they picked an influencer or independent journalist to do an interview with.

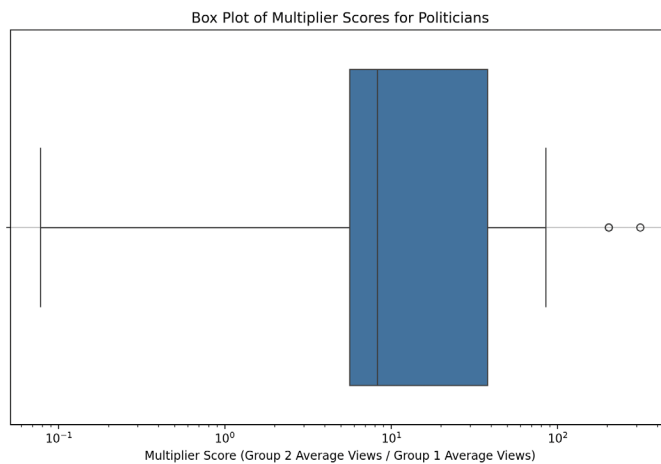


Figure 7: Distribution of multiplier scores between mean views in group 1 (influencers and independent journalists) and group 2 (mainstream media and digital channels). Individual scores are computed by selecting politicians who gave interviews with both groups, averaging their views for each group, and dividing group 2 average views by group 1 average views.

Next, we examined the length of the interviews, and found, rather surprisingly, that people are not necessarily seeking short-form content on political interviews, counter to widespread claims that social media users only want to consume bite-sized content. We visualized the relationship between views and the duration of the interviews on a scatter plot (figure 8) and find that there is a small positive relationship between the running length of the interview and the number of views.

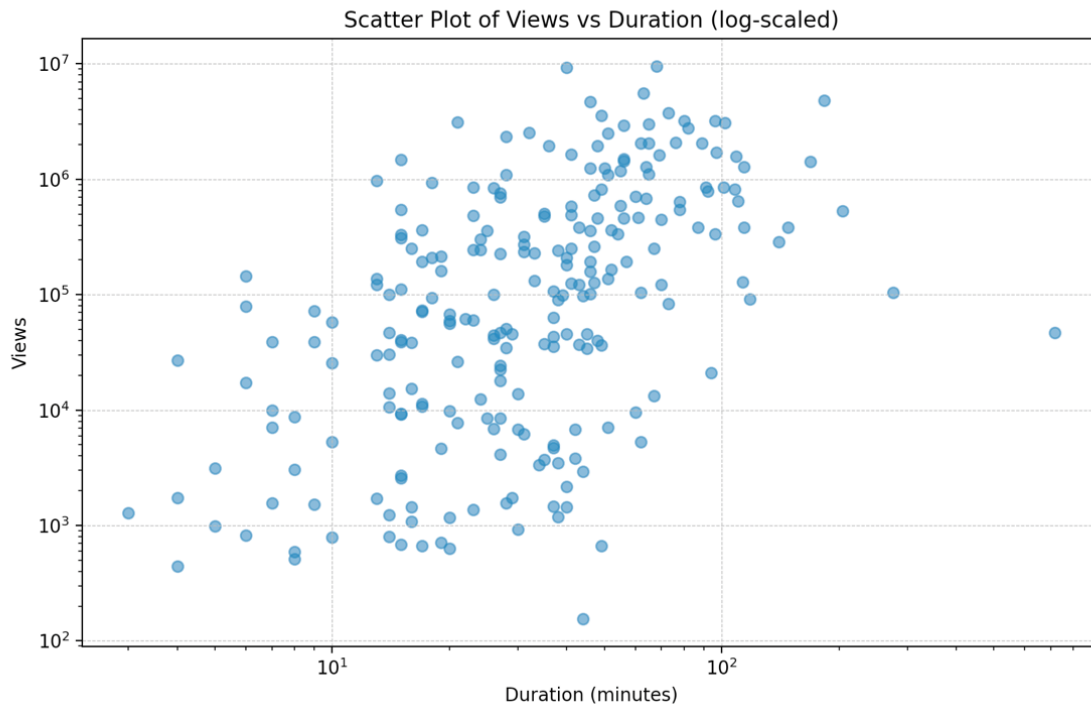
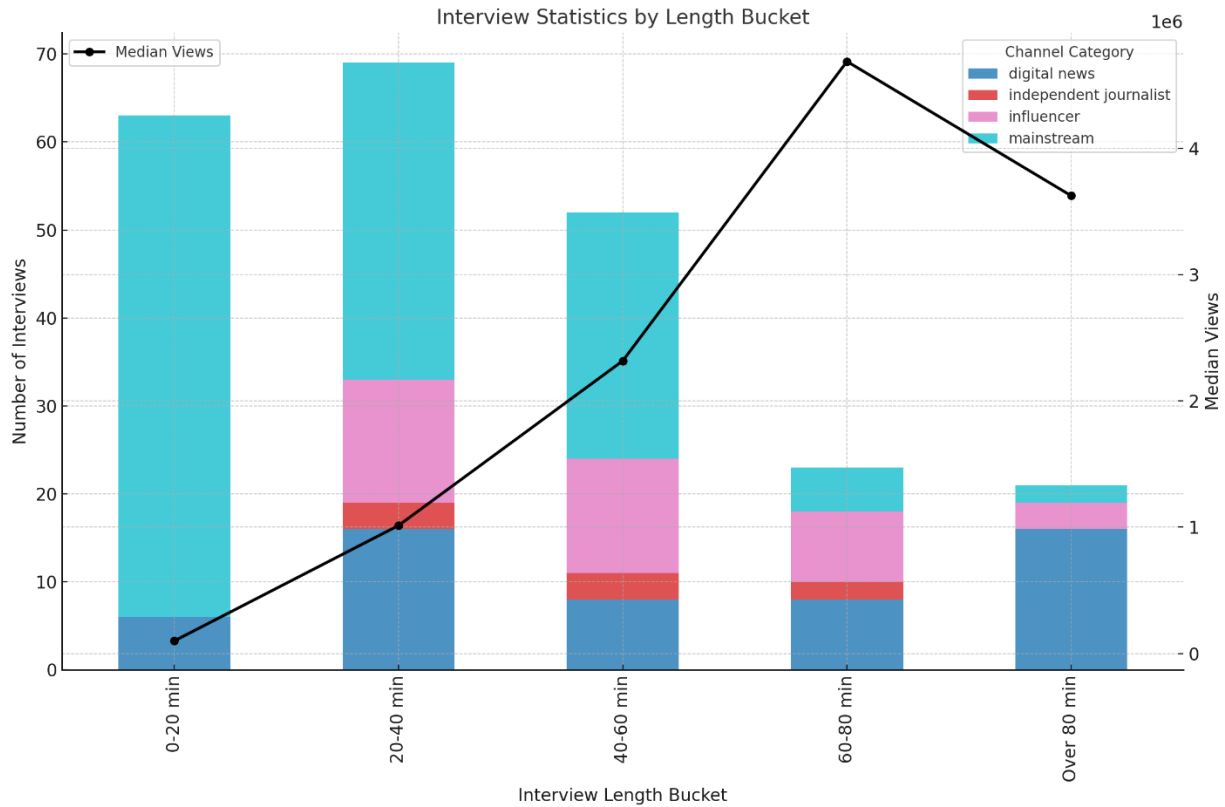


Figure 8: Plot of views of interviews by duration in minutes (both axes are log-scaled). The Pearson's correlation test indicates a coefficient of $r=0.29$ and a p-value of 0.000, indicating statistical significance at the 0.05 level.

Breaking this down, we see two trends, first that mainstream channels are more likely to have shorter interviews than the other channels, and second, that there is a sweet spot between 60 and 80 minutes where interviews get the most views. We see that once interviews are longer than 80 minutes, they start to get reduced viewership. Figure 9 also shows us that independent journalists and influencers seem to have more consistent interview lengths. In short, people seem willing to engage in long-form content when it comes to political interviews.



ANOVA Test for Views Across Length Buckets: F-statistic = 10.31, p-value = 1.12e-07

Figure 9: Bar chart of median interview views (log scaled) by duration batched into 20-minute lengths. The results are statistically significant based on ANOVA test.

When we turn to individual interviews, it is worth looking at the politicians who did the most interviews on YouTube channels. A look at figure 10 gives us a sense of how effective each politician was. The politicians noted here – Piyush Goyal, Ashwini Vaishnaw, Smriti Irani, Kanhaiya Kumar, Nitin Gadkari, S Jaishankar, Shivraj Chouhan, Asad Owaisi and Prashant Kishor are listed in ascending order of the median number of views that their videos get – Piyush Goyal gets the smallest number of views in this set on average, while Prashant Kishor gets the highest. We find one consistent pattern – that the least viewed interviews are mostly on mainstream news channels, whereas the most viewed are most likely to be with an influencer. Only Aaj Tak’s interviews with Kanhaiya Kumar and Shivraj Chouhan are among the highly viewed political interviews from a mainstream channel.

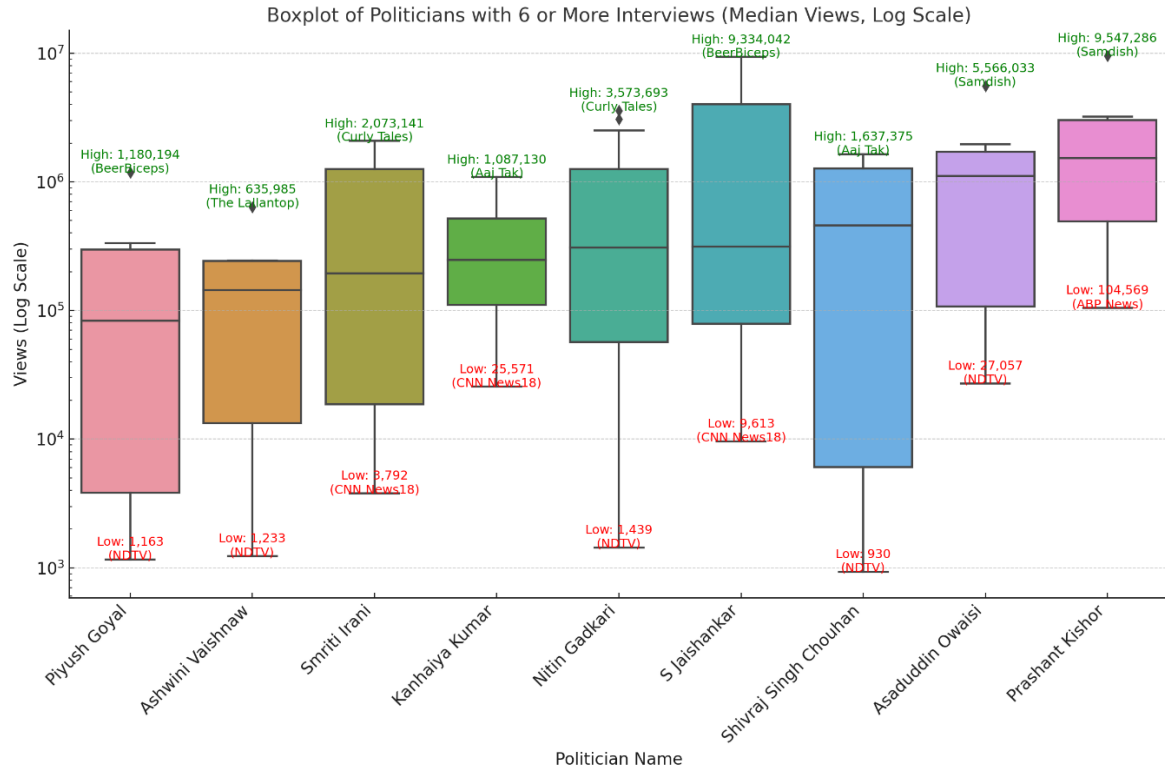


Figure 10: Box-plots showing the distribution of views for politicians who did multiple interviews and how they fared on each channel

When we turn to the throughput that influencer channels get when interviewing a politician, while we cannot claim, within the scope of this research, that interviewing a politician gets more views per video than a non-politician, a question that the influencers themselves may want to know more about, we can tell that a certain subset of influencers who are more accustomed to political content, such as BeerBiceps and Samdish, seem to be doing better with political interviews than the others.

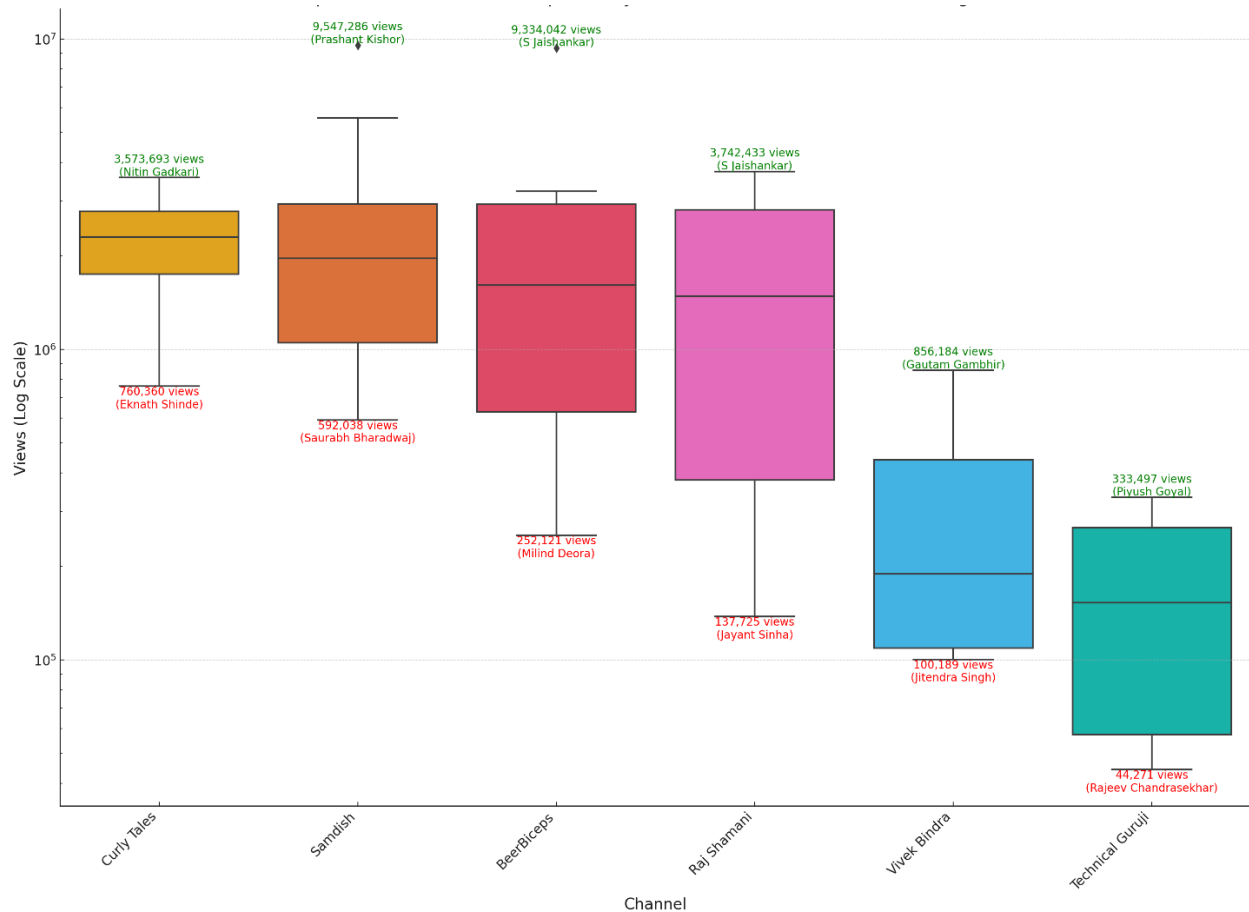


Figure 11: Box-plots showing the median views for each channel of an influencer with more than 5 political interviews during the year with max and min view interviews annotated.

Next, we turn to mainstream and digital media channels. Here we see that Lallantop far outperforms the other channels in terms of views per politician interview. Looking across figures 11 and 12, we also notice that two politicians, S Jaishankar and Prashant Kishor, gave the most viewed political interview for seven of the fourteen channels highlighted in the two graphs, suggesting a top-heavy system in which certain politicians with a strong public appeal drive views more than the channel or interviewer. We see this effect in the gap between interviews within the same channels. For instance, on Mojo Story, the Prashant Kishor interview received almost 200 times as many views as the interview of Aaditya Thackeray. On NDTV, the former's interview got 1700 times as many views as union minister Bhupender Yadav. On Aaj Tak his interview got a whopping 20,000 times as many views as former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh.

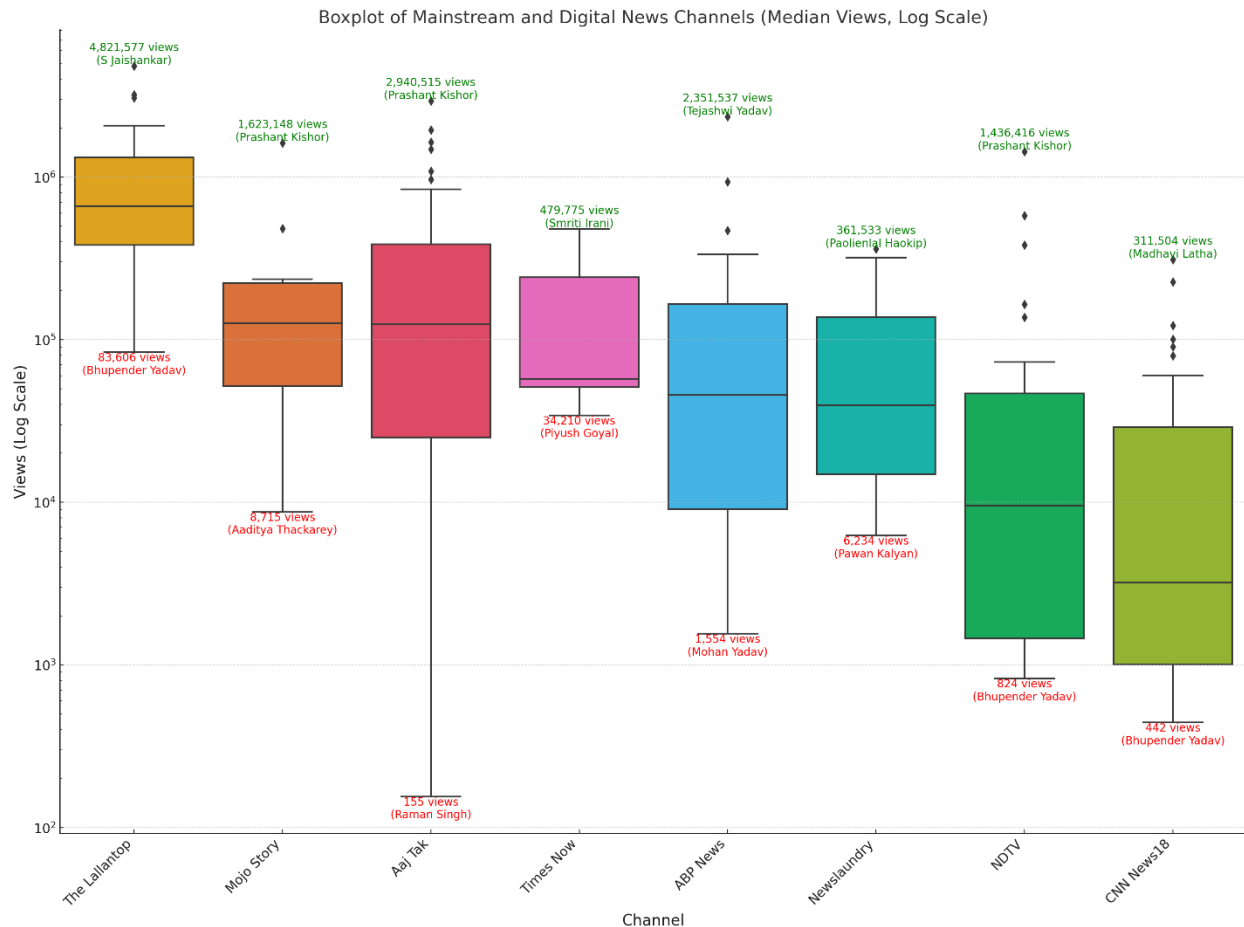


Figure 12: Box-plots showing the median views for each channel of a mainstream or digital media outlet with more than 5 political interviews during the year with max and min view interviews annotated.

It is also worth looking at the selection of politicians for interviews by each type of channel. To do this, we looked at how many followers a politician had on Twitter/X, and examined the relationship between their number of followers and which channels they appeared on. While the median followers were similar across the different channel types, influencers interviewed the top-followed politicians at a much higher rate. The top four channels, in terms of the social media reach of their political interviewees, were all influencers – Beer Biceps, Raj Shamani, Curly Tales, and Vivek Bindra. On average, any politician who appeared on one of their channels had about 6 million followers, whereas channels like Newslaundry, Mojo Story, Lallantop were on average interviewing politicians with much smaller footprints – each of these channels averaged less than 1 million median X followers per politician interviewed. In short, what we see is that irrespective of what channels politicians may want to be featured on, influencers can be very selective about who they will take on their channels.

Channel Type and Politician Followers

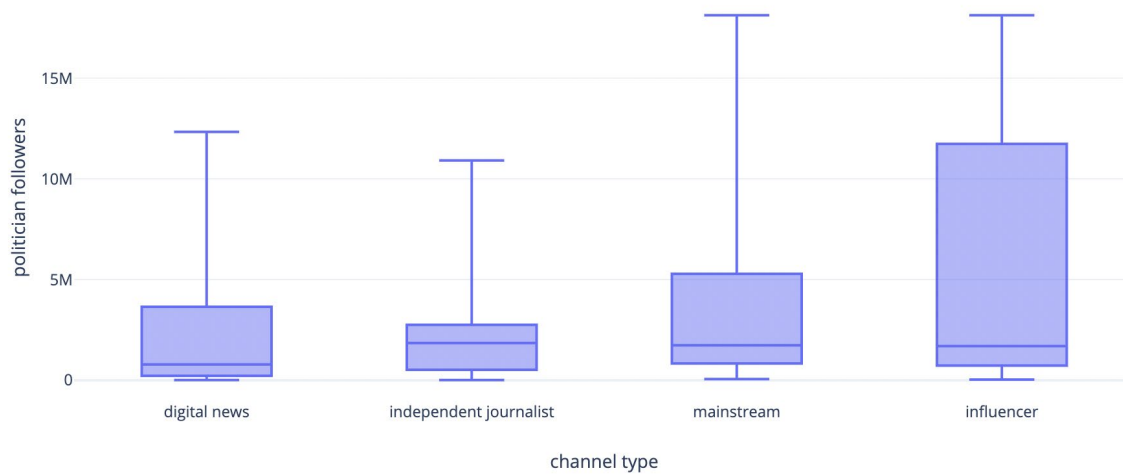


Figure 13: Box-plots of the distribution of the twitter followers of politicians that were interviewed, for each YouTube channel type. A *t*-test was conducted to compare the number of followers across all four media times, and the results shown are statistically significant with a *p*-value of .006

Conclusion

We highlight some of the evolving dynamics of political interviews specifically how influencers are reshaping political interviewing, particularly at the top of the ticket. While influencers and independent journalists outperform mainstream and digital media channels in viewership, there are issues of selectivity and not all politicians can equally access top shelf influencers. Findings highlight that while it may appear that networks of power are what drive access to such interviews, it is equally important that genuine and substantive content is what appears to get more engagement from audiences. The preference for long-form interviews is also a possibly reassuring trend that people do want to see politicians talk in depth rather than through bite-sized engagements.