

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE AND AWARENESS OF RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT: A CASE STUDY IN ASSAM

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Introduction

The flow of information sans any hassle is the sine qua non for a society to progress. Transparency in governance is the cornerstone of any vibrant democracy because it allows people access to all public information and promotes accountability. Citizens' right to information makes a government accountable and transparent, and the Right to Information Act (RTIA) of 2005 empowers citizens to intervene directly in a government's functioning.

In 1990, the movement for the right to information began with the non-governmental organisation "Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)" launching a protest in Rajasthan, asking the government to disclose information regarding a state employment generation scheme (Mishra, 2003). In 1996, different NGO members and activists formed the "National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI)" to spearhead a nationwide campaign for enacting the RTIA. The Indian government formed a committee under the chairmanship of social activist Hari Dev Shourie to formulate a bill regarding freedom of information. The committee drafted the "Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill, 2000," which was later enacted as the FOI Act in 2002.

The FOI Act faced flak from various quarters for permitting too many exceptions. Later, the FOI Act 2002 was replaced by the RTIA, 2005, which was enforced on October 12, 2005. The new legislation relaxed many restrictions imposed by the "Official Secrets Act, 1923," and other laws on disclosing information.

The RTIA defines "information" as:

"...any material in any form, including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force" (Right to Information Act, 2005).

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The RTIA, 2005 incorporates the procedures on how to seek information, how to apply, what steps should be taken if the government department denies sharing information, etc. It can be a tool for journalists to unearth wrongdoings in the public sector. Over the years, many journalists and social activists leveraged the power of the RTI to expose corruption in the government.

Judicial Interpretation:

The Supreme Court (SC) highlighted the importance of citizens' right to know in different landmark judgements.

In "State of UP v. Raj Narain & Ors," the court observed: "The people of this country have a right to know every public act; everything was done in a public way by their public functionaries". The court stated that the "right to know" "is derived from the concept of freedom of speech," enshrined under "Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution"(State Of U.P vs Raj Narain & Ors, 1975).

In the case of "Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India," a seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court said: "Freedom of speech and expression carries with it the right to gather information as also, to speak and express oneself at home and abroad and to exchange thoughts and ideas with others not only in India but also outside"(Maneka Gandhi vs Union Of India, 1978).

In another case, the SC stated:

"Where a society has chosen to accept democracy as its creedal faith, it is elementary that the citizens ought to know what their government is doing. The citizens have a right to decide by whom and by what rules they shall be governed, and they are entitled to call on those who govern on their behalf to account for their conduct"(S.P. Gupta vs President Of India And Ors., 1981).

The media, considered the fourth pillar of democracy, has a pivotal role in ensuring governmental transparency and accountability. The Act of 2005 has provided "a greater and wider space" to the media "in empowering people and consolidating a democratic polity"(Dr Nethravathi & Dr Guru, 2019).

Apart from creating awareness among the people about the legislation, the media must take proactive steps to use the RTIA to seek vital information from government offices. The press should also highlight the lives of RTI activists so that people can get acquainted with their work. People usually pin their hopes on media such as newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, etc., for daily consumption of news and information. The media platforms bridge the gap between the government and its citizens.

A section of the declaration in the World Summit on Information Society states that "the media -- in their various forms and with a diversity of ownership -- as an actor, have an essential role in the development of the Information Society and are recognised as an important contributor to freedom of expression and plurality of information"(World Summit at Geneva-Palexpo, 2004).

Research Objectives:

1. To evaluate Assam-based vernacular newspapers' role in generating awareness about the RTIA.
2. To analyse the coverage space of RTI-related stories in selected newspapers.
3. To find what kind of treatment a story on RTI gets in the vernacular dailies.
4. To assess the use of RTIA by journalists as a weapon in getting information.

Research Questions:

1. How many stories do vernacular dailies carry on the RTI in six months?
2. How many times have the names of the activists fighting for the cause of the RTI been highlighted in stories?
3. What types of content have been employed in newspaper stories related to the RTI?
4. Are journalists aware of the RTIA, and do they file applications to collect information under RTIA?

Hypothesis:

H_0 : There is no correlation between the journalists' educational qualifications and the level of awareness about the RTIA

H_1 : There is a correlation between the journalists' educational qualifications and the level of awareness about the RTIA

Literature Review :

Ramabrahmam (2009) underscored the importance of journalists' role in sensitising people about the provisions of the RTIA.

Chitra & Neelamalar (2013) conducted a study to understand the English newspapers' coverage of RTI-related issues by doing a content analysis of two prominent English-language newspapers, The Times of India and The Hindu, for 30 days. The study revealed that The Hindu carried comparatively more stories on RTI matters on the front page than the highest-circulation English-language daily, The Times of India. According to the findings, The Hindu provided coverage of an RTI activist on the front page. It highlighted his success stories in exposing corrupt practices, while The Times of India did not publish any story on the activists during the study period.

Nayak (2014) highlighted that the major loophole in the RTIA is that it does not have a provision to safeguard whistleblowers. He argued that many people do not come forward and expose corruption in different organisations because they feel unsafe. They fear that if they go against an institution, then it will take retaliatory action.

Acharjee (2016) described the RTIA as "one of the most revolutionary legislations in the history of democratic India" and stated that it had reinforced public participation in ensuring good governance. However, she expressed concern over the people's lack of awareness about the RTIA and its provisions. She suggested that steps should be taken at different levels to appraise the people, especially those who live in rural areas, of the benefits of the Act.

Rai (2016) carried out a study to see the coverage of RTI-related stories by the prominent Hindi newspapers in the country. For one year, his study includes a content analysis of four newspapers, Rashtriya Sahara, Dainik Jagaran, Hindustan, and Amar Ujala. The study concluded that the four prominent Hindi newspapers did not provide adequate importance to RTI matters as the number of stories was "not satisfactory." Rai pointed out that the media should help people know about different important provisions of the RTIA, the procedures through which an RTI application is filed, and how and when one can file an appeal if the RTI query goes unanswered. According to Rai, most people living in rural areas read Hindi newspapers; therefore, the vernacular media take the lead in informing people about their rights to seek information from the government.

In his book, Yadav (2017), a prominent investigative journalist, narrated different stories about how he used the RTI as a weapon to expose wrongdoings in the public and private sectors. The book also highlighted people's challenges in obtaining information through an RTI application. Yadav said that he filed "thousands of RTI applications" from the President's Office to the district collectors' offices to seek different kinds of information. He suggested that journalists should use RTI frequently to undertake investigative journalism.

Theoretical Framework:

The study employed two important theories, Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) and Agenda Setting Theory (AST). The SRT is a part of the normative theories of mass media, which were proposed by three scholars, Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm (1984). They talked about four different types of theories: Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist theories. While explaining the SRT, Aggarwal and Gupta (2001) said that this theory was derived from the "Commission on Freedom of the Press," also known as the "Hutchins Commission," which was set up in the United States in 1947. Aggarwal and Gupta said:

"According to the theory, although the press has a right to criticise the government and other institutions, it also has a responsibility to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to society's needs and interests."

Peterson discussed different functions of the press "under social responsibility theory"(Siebert et al., 1984). Peterson wrote that "servicing the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs; enlightening the public to make it capable of self-government; safeguarding the rights of the individuals by serving as a watchdog against the government" are some of the functions of the press. Considering the functions mentioned above of the press, it could be said that it is the responsibility of the media to inform people about the benefits of the RTIA. The media also have an obligation to be the watchdog against the government and expose wrongdoing in state-run organisations.

On the other hand, the AST states that the media can influence public opinion and set the agenda. Two scholars, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), who formulated this theory, wrote:

"In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position."

The political scientist Cohen (1963) stated that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." It could be argued that newspapers can create public opinion about a topic and make readers compel them to think about it. Therefore, the newspapers could easily draw the people's attention to the stories that were reported using the RTI. This theory makes it clear that positioning an article/news story is very important as it helps readers understand how much attention a particular story deserves.

Methodology :

The research methodology outlines the steps a researcher takes to conduct a study. The appropriate research methodology also guides a researcher in collecting data and then interpreting and analysing it correctly.

Research Design:

The study employed an exploratory cum descriptive research design.

Research Method:

The researchers use content analysis of select news stories from the two vernacular newspapers of Assam. The newspapers chosen are Guwahati editions of AsomiyaProtidin,

the largest Assamese-language daily of Assam, and DainikJugasankha, the largest circulated Bengali-language daily newspaper. The researchers considered all the RTI-related issues in the newspapers and analysed the content in frequency, allotted space, and tone of the article.

To understand the level of awareness about the RTIA among the journalists in Assam, the researchers adopted a survey method. It also helped the researchers know how frequently the regional journalists availed themselves of the law's benefits, whether they ever filed an RTI application, and how their experience was.

Content Analysis:

Population: All vernacular newspapers published in Assam.

Sample: Assam's leading vernacular dailies, AsomiyaProtidin, and DainikJugasankha, have been selected.

Sampling justification: Guwahati editions of AsomiyaProtidin and DainikJugasankha have been selected for the study as these two newspapers have wide circulation in the state. AsomiyaProtidin is the largest circulated Assamese daily, while DainikJugasankha is the largest circulated Bengali daily in the state. The researcher chose to analyse the RTI content of the vernacular newspapers because a previous study in India has shown that English-language dailies offer more space for RTI-related content (Shendurnikar).

Sampling technique and selection: The purposive sampling technique has been employed for newspapers. The researchers select Guwahati editions of the two newspapers, AsomiyaProtidin and DainikJugasankha, for their credibility and extensive circulation. The newspapers have been scanned for six months, from January to June 2022. The researchers have taken into account seven days of every month, starting with Sunday in the first month, Tuesday in the second month, Wednesday in the third month, Thursday in the fourth month, Friday in the fifth month, and Saturday in the sixth month in the case of both the newspapers to eliminate the scope of arbitrariness and bias. Altogether, 42 issues of each newspaper, that is 84 issues, have been considered. Both newspapers were chosen purposively, but the newspapers were scanned systematically to avoid sampling bias.

Inter-coder Reliability:

The researchers employed inter-coder reliability and hired two independent coders to ensure reliability. The coders scanned the issues of both newspapers (AsomiyaProtidin and DainikJugasankha) and coded them separately. The sample code for inter-coder reliability comprised 42 issues, 21 of AsomiyaProtidin and 21 of DainikJugasankha. The figure represented 50% of the sample. Coders have mainly dealt with a number of RTI stories that appeared in both newspapers.

Reliability test of AsomiyaProtidin and DainikJugasankha in the case of the number of RTI stories:

The researchers used the formula given by Holsti (1969) to test inter-coder reliability. A calculator was used to compute the data.

<p>DainikJugasankha:</p> <p>Percent Agreement = $2M \div (N1 + N2)$</p> <p>= $2 \times 2 \div 3 + 3$</p> <p>= 0.66</p> <p>The reliability coefficient, also known as percent agreement, is found to be 0.66, which shows a very high agreement among the coders, according to the Holsti's index.</p>	<p>AsomiyaPratidin:</p> <p>Percent Agreement = $2M \div (N1 + N2)$</p> <p>= $2 \times 3 \div 3 + 4$</p> <p>= 0.85</p> <p>The percent agreement is 0.85, and it also represents a very high agreement on a number of salient issues.</p>
<p>M = the total number of decisions that the two coders agreed upon.</p> <p>N1 = the first coder's coding decisions, and</p> <p>N2 = the second coder's total number of coding decisions.</p>	

Survey Method:

Many studies have not been conducted to understand the journalists' awareness and understanding of the RTIA in Assam. The study sought to know the level of awareness among Assam journalists about the Act. The researchers intended to analyse whether the journalists' age, level of education, training, experience, etc., impact their understanding of the RTIA. The researchers sent a structured questionnaire to 100 journalists who work in vernacular dailies to understand their level of awareness about the RTIA. Of 100, 92 journalists sent their response. The sampling was purposive. The researchers standardised the questionnaire by carrying out a pre-test among ten journalists. Two experts, a media educator and a senior journalist, validated the tool. The questionnaire used a five-point scale based on the Likert method to collect data.

Results and Discussion :

Content Analysis:

The reports, editorials or commentaries on RTI or the information obtained through the legislation or RTI activists, or interviews of experts, etc., are considered RTI content. All the pages of two newspapers, AsomiyaProtidin (AP) and DainikJugasankha (DJ), have been scanned based on the following content categories:

Sl No.	Content categories
1	Frequency of coverage
2	Placement of the reports
3	Usage of graphic
4	Type of content
5	Source of the report

Frequency of Coverage:

AsomiyaProtidin (AP) carried three stories on RTI in six months, from January to June 2022, while DainikJugasankha (DJ) carried only two stories in six months. Both newspapers did not carry any RTI story in January, February, March, April, and May. It shows minimal coverage of RTI-related content by the two leading vernacular dailies of Assam. Of 84 issues of the two newspapers scanned for six months, only three have carried RTI stories.

	January	February	March	April	May	June
AP*	0	0	0	0	0	3
DJ**	0	0	0	0	0	2

*AP- AsomiyaProtidin, **DJ- DainikJugasankha

Placement of the Reports:

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
AP*	0	0	0	0	2 (N=3)	0	1 (N=3)	0	0	0
DJ**	0	0	2 (N=2)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*AP- AsomiyaProtidin, **DJ- DainikJugasankha

AsomiyaPratidin carried 66.7% of RTI-related stories on the fifth page and 33.3% on the seventh page. It shows that 100% of RTI-related stories have been published on the third page of DainikJugansankha. Not a single RTI story has been published on the front page of either newspaper. The front page is a newspaper's most important page, and all the stories of paramount importance are published on the page. The absence of RTI-related content on the first page of both newspapers indicates that these newspapers do not pay adequate importance to RTI.

Usage of Graphic/Statistics:

Table 3 shows that none of the RTI-related stories carried graphics or data. Katherine (2007) cited Graber (1996) as saying that "combining pictures with words makes the message more memorable."

	January	February	March	April	May	June
AP*	0	0	0	0	0	0
DJ**	0	0	0	0	0	0

*AP- AsomiyaProtidin, **DJ- DainikJugasankha

Type of Content:

All the RTI-related stories published in both newspapers during the study period were reports. No editorial or commentary was published. An editorial is considered the voice of a particular publication. AsomiyaPratidin carried three reports, while DainikJugasankha carried two reports.

		January	February	March	April	May	June
AP*	Report	0	0	0	0	0	3 (N=3)
	Editorial	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Commentary	0	0	0	0	0	0
DJ**	Report	0	0	0	0	0	2 (N=2)
	Editorial	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Commentary	0	0	0	0	0	0

*AP- AsomiyaProtidin, **DJ- DainikJugasankha

Source of the Report:

AsomiyaProtidin got 33.3% (1 item) of agency news and 66.7% (2 items) of news from news reporters. DainikJugasankha got 100% (2 items) of news from the news reporters. None of the stories was based on the information accessed by the reporter after filing an RTI application.

	Source of the content	January	February	March	April	May	June
AP*	Agency News	0	0	0	0	0	1 (N=3)
	Experts	0	0	0	0	0	0
	News Reporter	0	0	0	0	0	2 (N=3)
DJ*	Agency News	0	0	0	0	0	2 (N=2)
	Experts	0	0	0	0	0	0
	News Reporter	0	0	0	0	0	0

*AP- AsomiyaProtidin, **DJ- DainikJugasankha

Survey: Of the 92 respondents, only 14 (15 %) journalists said they had filed an application under the RTIA to seek information. A majority of 78 (85%) never filed an application.

Age Group With Awareness of the RTIA:

Age Group	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very	Total
20-29	7	0	4	5	0	16
30-39	5	0	4	8	0	17
40-49	10	3	3	6	0	22
50-59	9	0	4	10	0	23
60 & above	8	0	2	4	0	14
Total	39	3	17	33	0	92

Table 6 shows that, out of 92 journalists, 39 journalists (42 %) said that their awareness of the RTIA was "very high," while three journalists (0.032%) said that their level of awareness was "high", 17 (18%) said "moderate", and 33 journalists (35%) said they have "low" awareness. It shows that around 50 per cent of the respondents are aware of the RTIA. Among the 92 journalists who filled in the questionnaire, 16 were of the 20-29 age group, 17 belonged to the 30-39 age group, 22 were of the 40-49 age, 23 were of the 50-59 age, and 14 respondents were of the 60 years and above age group.

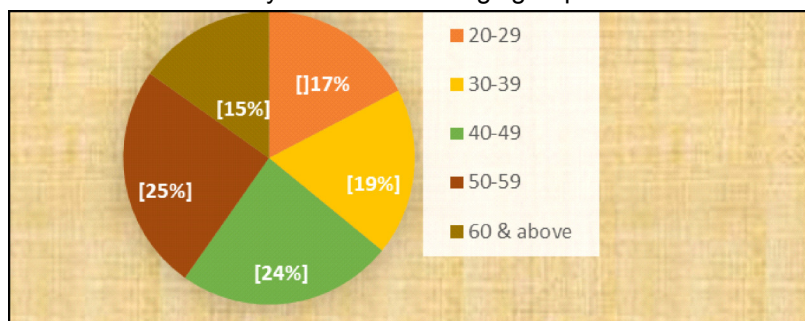


Figure 1. Age group distribution of respondents

Journalists' Educational Qualification and Understanding of the RTIA:

Out of the 51 graduates, 20 (39.21%) respondents said that they have "very high" awareness of the RTIA, two respondents (0.39%) said that they have "high" awareness and 11 respondents (21%) have a "medium" level of awareness. Among 14 postgraduates, 7 (50%) have a "very high" awareness. Of the 17 respondents who did a postgraduation diploma in mass communication and journalism, 9 (52.94%) have a "very high" level of awareness. The respondents who studied up to class 12 passed said that they have a "very

low" (66.6%) awareness of the RTIA. Of the 4 M.Phil and PhD holders, 3 (75%) said they have a "very high" awareness of the RTIA.

Educational Qualification	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low	Total
HSLC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Higher Secondary	0	1	1	4	0	6
Graduation	20	2	11	18	0	51
Postgraduation	7	0	0	7	0	14
PG Diploma in MCJ (Journalism and Mass Communication)	9	0	4	4	0	17
MPhil/PhD.	3	0	1	0	0	4
Total	39	3	17	33	0	92

Figure 3 indicates that out of the total respondents, 51 were graduates, 14 were postgraduates, 17 had postgraduation diplomas in mass communication and journalism, four had either M.Phil or PhD degrees, and six studied up to class 12.

Pearson's Chi-Square Test for Hypothesis Testing:

The study performed a chi-square test of independence, also known as Pearson's chi-square test, to determine the correlation between educational qualifications and the level of journalists' awareness of the RTIA.

Using the above data, a contingency table was prepared:

Educational Qualification	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Row Totals
Higher Secondary	0	1	1	4	6
Graduation	20	2	11	18	51
Postgraduation	7	0	0	7	14
PG Diploma in MCJ	9	0	4	4	17
MPhil/PhD.	3	0	1	0	4
Column Totals	39	3	17	33	N= 92

After calculating the expected frequency $[E = (\text{Row Total} \times \text{Column Total})/N]$ for each cell, the researcher used the following formula to find out the chi-square static:

$$X^2 = \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E} = 16.54$$

O represents observed frequency, E means expected frequency

Degrees of freedom: $(R-1) \times (C-1) = 12$

The p-value at 0.05 significance level is approximately 0.168.

Since the p-value is greater than the significance value of 0.05, the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. This means there is no strong evidence of any correlation between educational qualifications and the level of awareness of RTIA among journalists.

Conclusion :

The study revealed that the vernacular dailies from Assam provide less importance to RTIA-related content. After scanning 84 issues for six months, the research found only five stories related to RTIA from two prominent vernacular newspapers. This shows a lack of intent among the Assam-based newspapers to popularise the RTIA. It is astonishing to witness that journalists from both popular newspapers did not file any RTI application during the study period to seek information from the government.

The RTIA can also be used positively. It is not necessary to invoke it only to highlight anomalies; it can also be used to highlight the success of a government scheme.

However, the RTIA is relatively well-known among journalists who work in vernacular dailies. Only 35% of the journalists who filled in the questionnaire claimed they had a "low" awareness of the RTIA.

In a small state like Assam, RTIA can be essential for journalists who want to do investigative reports. The study suggests that media houses should encourage journalists to use RTI and organise training programmes to increase awareness about the legislation among journalists.

The study found that neither newspaper has separate pages dedicated to RTIA-related stories. Stories on the life of RTI activists should also be published regularly by the vernacular dailies to create awareness among the common people.

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