



Original Article

The Prime-Time Public Sphere: Assessing NDTV's *we the People* as a Platform for Inclusive Political Dialogue in India

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Abstract

*This study examines NDTV's *We the People* as a mediated public sphere and a site for inclusive debate within India's television landscape. Drawing on Habermas (1989) and Fraser (1990), it investigates how the show converges diverse voices—citizens, experts, and policymakers—to deliberate on social and political issues. Through qualitative analysis of selected episodes, the research evaluates the program's capacity to foster democratic dialogue. Findings indicate that while the show strives for reasoned debate and inclusivity, particularly for marginalized perspectives, it remains constrained by an English-language and urban bias. Nevertheless, it expands the traditional boundaries of public discourse by validating personal experience and emotion as legitimate components of political discussion. Ultimately, the program operates as a "hybrid public sphere," merging rational argumentation with empathetic engagement. It demonstrates that television can function as a pedagogical space, encouraging citizens to listen and reflect. *We the People* thus exemplifies that meaningful public conversation is possible in Indian media—rational yet emotional, elite yet participatory, and reflective of the nation's plural voices.*

Keywords: Public Sphere, Jürgen Habermas, Prime-Time Debates, Deliberative Democracy, Indian Television News, Mediated Communication, NDTV *We the People*

Introduction

The strength of democracy rests on the quality, extensiveness, and civility of its public discourse. Sincere participation depends on citizens' ability to engage in open, reasoned debate—a process central to Jürgen Habermas's (1989) idea of the *public sphere*. This communicative arena, built on rational-critical discussion and equal access, strengthens democratic acceptability. Yet, in the media age, this ideal has transformed. The public sphere is now mediated through **television, digital platforms, and social media**, where communication is shaped by commercialization and spectacle (Couldry, 2010; Dahlgren, 2005).

In India, this shift accelerated after the 1990s liberalization, which brought an explosion of private television news. Prime-time debates, once civic forums, have turned into confrontational performances. As Thussu (2007) notes, the "infotainment turn" blurred the line between information and entertainment, replacing deliberation with theatrics. The ethical and deliberative values of Indian journalism have thus drawn critical attention (Jeffrey, 2010; Mehta, 2008).

Amid this milieu, certain programmes still strive to preserve deliberative ideals. NDTV's *We the People* stands out for its structured, civil, and multi-perspective discussions on political, social, and cultural issues. Unlike most high-decibel formats, it seeks to sustain inclusive reasoning through moderated dialogue. Its long-form structure and balanced tone make it an important site for examining whether television can still serve as a mediated public sphere within a commercial and polarized ecosystem.

This study examines whether *We the People* genuinely promotes **inclusive political dialogue**—allowing diverse voices meaningful space—or remains limited to elite discourse shaped by urban and linguistic hierarchies. Using qualitative discourse analysis of five episodes (2013–2020), it explores participation, representation, and deliberation across varied contexts. Episodes such as *2014: A Watershed Election*, *The Idea of India*, and *Social Media: A Toxic Space for Women?* are analysed to position *We the People* as both a media text and a deliberative experiment.

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This inquiry gains importance amid India's growing crisis of deliberation, where ideological division and sensationalism undermine democratic dialogue (Mishra & Kumar, 2020). Drawing on Habermas (1989) and Fraser (1990), the study assesses how televised debates can maintain inclusivity and deliberative depth in a market-driven media environment.

Ultimately, the research contributes to debates on the **mediated public sphere and deliberative democracy**, offering a contextual understanding of how Indian television negotiates the tensions between journalistic ethics, commercial pressures, and the democratic need for open, plural dialogue.

Literature Review

Media as a forum for deliberation remains a cornerstone of democratic theory. Jürgen Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere provides the foundational lens, envisioning an autonomous domain where private citizens engage in rational debate free from state or economic coercion. While rooted in the 18th-century bourgeois experience, this ideal continues to anchor scholarship on political participation. However, the Habermasian model faces sustained critique for its historical exclusions. Nancy Fraser (1990) challenged the notion of a unified sphere, arguing it systematically marginalized women and minorities. She proposed "subaltern counter-publics," spaces where excluded groups forge alternative discourses. Similarly, Spivak (1988) and Young (2000) argue that privileging a single, rationalist mode of communication ignores the cultural and emotional dimensions of political speech—a critical limitation in postcolonial contexts like India.

In the digital age, media do not merely transmit debates; they shape them through framing and visibility (Ferree et al., 2002). Livingstone and Lunt (1994) describe television talk shows as "discursive rituals" where institutional rules and journalistic choices dictate participation. Consequently, the mediated public sphere is never neutral; its inclusivity relies heavily on editorial judgment and production design. India's 1990s liberalization birthed a fiercely competitive, commercial media landscape. Thussu (2007) characterizes this shift as an "infotainment turn," where news blends with entertainment, prioritizing spectacle over substance. Jeffrey (2010) and Mehta (2008) observe that corporate ownership and market pressures have reshaped journalistic ethics, resulting in a polarized culture that often sacrifices complex social analysis for high-voltage political theatre.

Recent scholarship highlights a sharp decline in deliberative quality. Mishra and Kumar (2020) note that prime-time debates increasingly favour confrontation and ideological grandstanding, creating a "theatre of noise." These trends undermine the media's civic role, making the search for spaces that still value rational dialogue essential. NDTV's *We the People* stands as a distinctive counter-narrative. Since the early 2000s, this town-hall platform has convened policymakers, activists, and citizens for structured dialogue. Unlike aggressive counterparts, it emphasizes civility. Its thematic breadth—ranging from "2014: A

Watershed Election" to "Social Media: A Toxic Space for Women?"—offers an ideal case study for examining effective mediated deliberation.

While specific analyses of *We the People* are scarce, broader research on televised participation provides context. Western studies (Maia, 2012; Ferree et al., 2002) suggest such formats can either expand inclusion or reinforce hierarchies. In India, however, the unique interplay of linguistic diversity, social inequality, and market forces demands a tailored framework to assess deliberative quality. This study positions *We the People* as a mediated public sphere where democratic ideals intersect with market realities. By grounding analysis in both classical theory and contemporary critique, this research aims to illuminate how televised debates can nurture civic dialogue within India's evolving media ecology.

Research Problem, Rationale, and Scholarly Gap

The central concern of this study is the crisis of deliberation in Indian television news. Over the past two decades, the media landscape has shifted from informative journalism to spectacle-driven programming, where ratings often overshadow public reasoning (Thussu, 2007; Mehta, 2008). In this polarized ecosystem, the space for reflective debate has diminished. However, NDTV's *We the People* attempts to restore deliberative journalism by offering a moderated platform for social and political discussion. This programme serves as a critical case for evaluating whether television can still function as a democratic public sphere in a diverse, linguistically plural society.

The study investigates whether *we the People* operates as a genuine mediated public sphere that facilitates inclusive political dialogue, or if it remains an elite discourse bound by commercial constraints. This inquiry addresses two interrelated concerns:

- Does the programme embody the principles of inclusivity, civility, and rational debate envisioned in Habermasian and post-Habermasian frameworks?
- Do its structure, participant composition, and moderation style enable meaningful representation of India's diversity, or do they merely reproduce existing hierarchies?

The rationale is both theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, Indian television provides a fertile ground to test global models of the public sphere. Concepts originally framed within Western democracies (Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990) require re-evaluation in India's postcolonial, media-saturated context. This study explores how deliberation survives in a market-oriented environment and whether a national platform can approximate inclusive democratic ideals.

Empirically, this research addresses the scarcity of systematic studies on long-form debate formats. While existing literature documents the decline of deliberative standards (Mishra & Kumar, 2020) and the rise of infotainment (Thussu, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010), few inquiries analyse programmes that consciously resist these tendencies. By employing qualitative discourse analysis of five episodes (2013–2020), this study offers a grounded



exploration of how representation and tone have evolved, capturing shifts in political communication over time.

Scholarly Gap

Scholarship on Indian television news predominantly focuses on macro-level critiques—ownership concentration, bias, and the erosion of ethics (Mehta, 2008; Chakravarty & Roy, 2013). These studies often overlook the micro-level dynamics of dialogue within specific programmes. There is limited empirical attention to how inclusivity is negotiated in practice or how moderation affects democratic engagement.

This study fills that gap by offering:

- A programme-level analysis of *We the People* as a mediated public sphere;
- A qualitative, transcript-based exploration of argumentation and tone; and
- A contextual re-theorization of deliberative journalism within India's plural society.
- By bridging normative theory and media practice, this research contributes to global debates on deliberative democracy and Indian scholarship on political communication.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design rooted in critical discourse analysis and interpretive textual inquiry, an approach best suited to exploring the discursive nature of televised debates. Because *We the People* functions as a conversational, performative space rather than a static dataset, quantitative content analysis cannot adequately capture the nuances of tone, representation, and ideological framing. Qualitative inquiry enables the interpretation of meaning production through language and interaction (Fairclough, 1995; Silverman, 2013). This aligns with the study's central objective: evaluating the deliberative character of televised discourse rather than measuring

The tabulated list of Episode chosen is given below

No.	Episode Title	Year	Duration	Main Theme
1	2014: A Watershed Election – Will It Change India's Politics?	2014	49:51	Electoral change and participation
2	2014: A Battle of Ideas?	2013	51:52	Ideological polarization; secularism
3	The NDTV Dialogues: The Idea of India, 2014	2013	45:34	Competing notions of national identity
4	Social Media: A Toxic Space for Women?	2020	53:10	Gender, technology, and online abuse
5	Body Shaming – Unfair and Ugly	2017	16:58	Body politics and cultural representation

Table 1 – Episodes of NDTV's *We the People* (2013–2020)

This study analyses five purposively selected episodes of NDTV's *We the People*, broadcast between 2013 and 2020. Chosen to reflect diverse political and sociocultural themes, these episodes illustrate the programme's evolving deliberative structure. Spanning critical junctures—from the 2014 General Elections to debates on gender and digital toxicity—the sample allows for a comparative examination of mediated dialogue within shifting socio-political contexts.

The selected episodes include:

speech volume. Following Denzin and Lincoln (2018), this paradigm seeks to understand "how social reality is constructed through communication practices." Furthermore, this interpretive method reflects the Indian prime-time television landscape, where meaning is embedded in framing and representation rather than numerical trends (Mehta, 2008; Thussu, 2007). This methodological approach was selected for three primary reasons:

Relevance to Objectives: The inquiry prioritizes *how* inclusivity is constructed over the frequency of its occurrence. Qualitative analysis captures subtleties in argumentation that numerical methods miss (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Suitability for Television: As complex multimodal texts, television debates combine speech and performance. Discourse analysis accounts for both content and mediated structure (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

Contextual Fit: Indian television operates within a postcolonial landscape shaped by linguistic diversity and political contestation (Thussu, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010). Qualitative analysis accommodates these variables more effectively than quantitative approaches.

Ultimately, this method aligns with critical communication traditions, prioritizing meaning-making and power relations to assess the show's democratic potential and structural limitations.

Data Selection and Sources

Data comprises five purposively selected episodes of NDTV's *We the People* (2013–2020), representing diverse political, cultural, and gendered issues. Episodes were chosen for their thematic relevance to democracy and inclusivity, as well as the availability of verifiable transcripts.

1. 2014: A Watershed Election — Will It Change India's Politics?
2. 2014: A Battle of Ideas?
3. The NDTV Dialogues: The Idea of India (2014)
4. Social Media: A Toxic Space for Women?
5. Body Shaming — Unfair and Ugly

Retrieved from NDTV's official digital archives to ensure authenticity, each video was transcribed in full as a primary unit for qualitative analysis. These transcripts capture both participant exchanges and moderator



interventions, mapping the discursive texture of the televised public sphere. Totalling approximately four hours, the dataset features a diverse range of speakers—including politicians, scholars, activists, and citizens. This variety facilitates an assessment of representational inclusivity,

argument diversity, and epistemic quality. Ultimately, this corpus enables an interpretive critique of how *We the People* negotiates commercial and ethical demands, determining whether it fosters genuine democratic dialogue or reproduces elite discursive norms.

No.	Episode Title	Theme / Focus	Source Links (YouTube & NDTV Web Archive)
1	<i>2014: A Watershed Election — Will It Change India's Politics?</i>	Examines the transformative nature of the 2014 General Election and how it redefined Indian political discourse and symbolism.	<input type="checkbox"/> YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKcQelQOWzA <input type="checkbox"/> NDTV Web Archive: https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/we-the-people/2014-a-watershed-election-will-it-change-india-s-politics-312145
2	<i>2014: A Battle of Ideas?</i>	Analyzes ideological narratives ahead of the 2014 elections—contrasting Narendra Modi's modernization discourse with Rahul Gandhi's social justice politics.	<input type="checkbox"/> YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVIUD2pg4U <input type="checkbox"/> NDTV Web Archive: https://www.ndtv.com/video/2014-a-battle-of-ideas-295858
3	<i>The NDTV Dialogues: The Idea of India (2014)</i>	Reflects on competing visions of nationalism, identity, and governance; features Kapil Sibal, Sunil Khilnani, Ashok Malik, and Ananya Vajpeyi.	<input type="checkbox"/> YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YPLV64Z8HM <input type="checkbox"/> NDTV Web Archive: https://www.ndtv.com/video/the-ndtv-dialogues-the-idea-of-india-2014-298281
4	<i>Social Media: A Toxic Space for Women?</i>	Explores misogyny, gendered abuse, and online harassment through the #IndiaAgainstAbuse campaign; features actors Sayani Gupta and Maanvi Gagroo.	<input type="checkbox"/> YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Gp0hKJnvA8 <input type="checkbox"/> NDTV Web Archive: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qV4E5bFoM4o
5	<i>Body Shaming — Unfair and Ugly</i>	Discusses societal beauty norms, body image politics, and the psychological impact of body shaming; includes celebrity and citizen voices.	<input type="checkbox"/> YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXeIXaCqauU <input type="checkbox"/> NDTV Web Archive: https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/we-the-people/body-shaming-unfair-and-ugly-452891

Table 2 Selected Episodes for their thematic relevance

Discussion and Data Analysis

The analytical component of this study is grounded in a **qualitative, text-based discourse analysis** of five selected episodes. These episodes were chosen for their thematic and temporal diversity, spanning from pre-election political debates to socially oriented discussions on gender and body politics. This temporal spread allows for a comparative understanding of how *We the People* negotiates inclusivity and deliberation across shifting political and social contexts.

To maintain data authenticity and reliability, the transcripts of these episodes were obtained directly from **NDTV's official digital archives** and verified against their corresponding broadcast versions available on NDTV's YouTube channel. Each transcript was treated as a complete communicative event, preserving both the spoken exchanges and the moderator's interventions, which together shape the deliberative texture of the programme.

This study employs a **text-centered discourse analysis** approach to examine how *We the People* constructs and mediates public deliberation. The method focuses on the **verbal, rhetorical, and interactional dimensions** of the debates rather than numerical coding or frequency counts. Following the interpretive principles outlined by Silverman

(2013), the analysis prioritizes **contextual meaning and communicative patterns** over quantification, recognizing that the value of televised discourse lies in its symbolic and dialogic nuances.

The analysis unfolds through three interrelated dimensions:

- **Nature of Discussion:**

This aspect explores how each episode frames and develops its central issue. It distinguishes between instances of **reasoned, evidence-based deliberation** and those characterized by **performative or confrontational exchanges**, typical of commercial television formats. This helps evaluate whether the show sustains reflective civic dialogue or veers toward spectacle.

- **Representation and Voice:**

This dimension assesses the **breadth and balance of social representation** among participants—politicians, journalists, scholars, activists, and ordinary citizens. The analysis examines whose voices dominate, whose are marginalized, and whether the programme achieves substantive inclusivity beyond token representation.

- **Role of the Moderator:**

The moderator's function is examined to determine whether their role aligns with the **deliberative**



facilitator model—ensuring balance, civility, and inclusion—or with a **directive model**, which may centralize control or steer the debate. The anchor's style is thus understood as a critical variable influencing the programme's overall deliberative quality.

Through this interpretive approach, the research situates *We the People* as a **mediated communicative space** that operates between the ideals of democratic deliberation and the realities of market-driven journalism. This analytical framework enables a nuanced understanding of how televised debates can simultaneously **reflect, reproduce, and resist** the tensions inherent in India's contemporary media environment.

Episode Analysis 1: 2014 – A Watershed Election: Will It Change India's Politics?

Source: NDTV *We the People* Broadcast Date: May 12, 2014

Nature of Discussion: Broadcast from Varanasi during the 2014 general election, this episode interrogated whether the polls marked a democratic "watershed," framing the contest as a struggle between diverging "ideas of India." The dialogue contrasted Yogendra Yadav's advocacy for pluralism with the defensive narratives of major party representatives. Distinguished by its reflective tone and cultural grounding—invoking Ustad Bismillah Khan's legacy—the debate prioritized epistemic substance and civility over the usual prime-time combative ness.

Representation and Voice: Despite the characteristically syncretic setting at Kabir Chaura Math, the conversation remained stratified. While the panel included diverse political and cultural figures, discursive authority was concentrated among English-speaking elites. Citizen participation was minimal; however, the presence of local cultural icons offered a tenuous bridge to vernacular publics, underscoring the structural hierarchies that persist within India's mediated sphere.

Role of the Moderator: The moderator, Barkha Dutt, functioned as a deliberative facilitator, steering the discourse toward substantive issues rather than spectacle. By intertwining cultural respect with political inquiry, the anchoring adhered to principles of communicative rationality, successfully modelling a dialogic format distinct from the adversarial norms of contemporary news.

Interpretive Synthesis: This episode demonstrates the program's potential to serve as a mediated deliberative space, offering depth amidst a polarized media landscape. However, the dominance of elite voices restricts its democratic reach. Consequently, the broadcast represents a "partial realization" of the public sphere—attempting to reconcile the ethos of Indian pluralism with the inherent exclusivity of English-language television.

Episode Analysis 2: 2014 – A Battle of Ideas?

Nature of Discussion: Broadcast amid the polarized run-up to the 2014 General Elections, the episode probed whether the Modi–Gandhi faceoff marked a substantive contest of ideas or simply a personality-driven power struggle. Using the Patna Hunkar Rally as its point of departure, the debate revolved around two key tensions: nationalism framed as "India First" versus established secular traditions, and

identity-based mobilization versus development-oriented governance. Despite sharp ideological differences, the discussion retained a high deliberative standard, prioritizing issues over spectacle.

Representation and Voice: The panel combined party representatives, analysts, and citizens affected by the Muzaffarnagar violence, grounding political narratives in lived experience. Yet, even with ideological variation, sociological breadth remained limited; vernacular perspectives were filtered through elite, English-speaking interlocutors, constraining fuller inclusivity.

Role of the Moderator: Barkha Dutt adopted a measured, facilitative approach, framing the conversation as a conceptual exploration rather than partisan combat. Her insistence on neutrality and moral gravity—especially given the backdrop of communal violence—helped sustain a serious, substantive exchange.

Interpretive Synthesis: The episode represents an uncommon effort to re-anchor ideological argumentation within Indian prime-time news, foregrounding political philosophy over theatrical conflict. Although shaped by elite epistemic boundaries, the discussion achieved notable analytical depth. It aligns with Dahlgren's (2005) formulation of the "mediated public sphere," illustrating that reasoned deliberation can endure even within commercially driven media settings.

Episode Analysis 3: The NDTV Dialogues – The Idea of India (2014)

Nature of Discussion Broadcast prior to the 2014 General Elections, this episode transcended typical campaign rhetoric to interrogate the philosophical "Idea of India." Rather than a clash of ideologies, the dialogue framed national identity as an evolving constitutional ethos. Perspectives ranged from Sunil Khilnani's view of India as an open construct to Kapil Sibal's critique of policy discourse, balancing abstract ideals with the pragmatic challenges of governance and justice.

Representation and Voice The panel facilitated a sophisticated, multidisciplinary exchange among elite voices—historians, politicians, and scholars. However, the discourse remained socially exclusive; the notable absence of grassroots or regional representation highlighted the structural limitation of confining national deliberation to privileged forums.

Role of the Moderator Employing a Socratic, facilitative style, the moderator prioritized civic reasoning over political spectacle. Her neutral framing allowed for a coherent exploration of whether the nation faced conflicting visions or merely diverse interpretations of a unified idea, maintaining a rare thematic continuity.

Interpretive Synthesis This broadcast exemplifies journalism functioning as public philosophy. While it mirrored Habermasian rational-critical discourse in its depth, its elite composition exposed the tension between high-quality deliberation and democratic accessibility. Ultimately, the episode demonstrated commercial media's potential to sustain a normative, thoughtful dialogue on the nation's future.

Episode Analysis 4: Social Media – A Toxic Space for Women?

Nature of Discussion: Broadcast during the 2020 lockdown following threats against comedian Agrama Joshua, this episode framed digital gendered violence as a systemic cultural pathology rather than a technological aberration. Panelists, including journalist Kanika Kohli and actor Sayani Gupta, navigated the tension between lived trauma and institutional inertia, conceptualizing the online sphere as a hostile amplification of offline patriarchal structures.

Representation and Voice: While the inclusion of diverse voices—such as content creator Dhruv Shah on toxic masculinity—effectively bridged policy and ethics, the discourse betrayed an urban-elite bias. Consequently, the distinct digital vulnerabilities of rural and non-English speaking women remained largely unaddressed.

Role of the Moderator: Sarah Jacob balanced empathy with analytical rigor, effectively linking micro-level narratives to macro-level governance failures. Her moderation consistently pivoted the focus from moral indignation toward specific state and corporate accountability.

Interpretive Synthesis: Thematically, the episode functioned as a mediated feminist subaltern counterpublic (Fraser, 1990), transmuting private grievances into public political claims. By validating emotional knowledge alongside rational critique, the broadcast exposed digital harassment as a mechanism of gendered silencing, challenging the presumed neutrality of the public sphere.

Episode Analysis 5: Body Shaming — Unfair and Ugly

Nature of Discussion: Hosted by Sarah Jacob, the episode probes how beauty and self-worth are socially constructed. Linking global celebrities with Indian women—from film actors to working professionals—it traces the psychological burden of constant visibility. The central question interrogates how digital surveillance sustains gender hierarchies and whether self-acceptance can endure in a culture governed by appearance.

Representation and Voice: The panel connects celebrity narratives with everyday realities. Nutritionist Rujuta Diwekar diagnoses body shaming as a public health issue, while radio professional Tanzila exposes its role in workplace discrimination, underscoring that these concerns cut across class. Generational contrasts appear through Pooja Bedi and Aalia Bedi's reflections. Male perspectives

reveal stark asymmetries: Dilip Tahil urges empathy, whereas Vikram Bhat controversially recasts shaming as “discipline,” exposing the divide between critique and humiliation.

Moderator's Role: Jacob anchors the discussion in sociological analysis rather than celebrity commentary. By aligning public health data with cultural critique, she redirects attention to structural questions of gendered labor and beauty capitalism, reframing body image as an ethical and systemic issue rather than personal vanity.

Interpretive Synthesis: The episode embodies Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power, illustrating how women internalize surveillance. It echoes Gill's (2007) postfeminist paradox of empowerment amid objectification and draws on Butler's (1990) performativity to show how shame enforces gender norms. Collectively, the dialogue recasts aesthetic judgment as a mechanism of social control rather than moral worth.

Thematic Insights

Democratization of Experience: The discussion dissolves class divides, revealing shared vulnerability to beauty-based regulation.

Digital Panopticon: Social media converts personal judgment into public spectacle.

Gendered Standards: Female bodies remain bound by stricter visual expectations than their male counterparts.

Interpretive Conclusion: “Body Shaming — Unfair and Ugly” functions as a feminist pedagogical forum. It dismantles the neoliberal fusion of physical perfection and moral identity, transforming individual shame into a call for collective resistance and solidarity.

Across episodes spanning political polarization and body politics, *We the People* functions as a mediated deliberative arena. The show navigates the tension between Habermas's (1989) “public sphere” and Fraser's (1990) “subaltern counter-publics,” negotiating identity and justice within the constraints of commercial broadcasting.

Habermasian Frame: The Televised Public Sphere- Viewed through Habermas (1989), the show aspires to rational-critical debate but remains an imperfect realization of the ideal. While it provides a structured platform for dialogue, genuine civic equality is compromised by linguistic elitism and market pressures. Consequently, the program represents a public sphere under negotiation rather than a coercion-free zone of pure rationality.

Habermasian Feature	Manifestation in NDTV's <i>We the People</i>	Evaluation
Accessibility	Open to diverse participants — politicians, activists, experts, citizens.	✓ <input type="checkbox"/> High in intent, but limited by elite language (English) and metropolitan framing.
Rational-Critical Debate	Structured dialogue, issue-based questions, moderation that encourages reflection.	✓ <input type="checkbox"/> Present in tone, though emotional testimony often intersects with rational argument.
Autonomy from State and Market	Editorial independence in topic selection and critique of power.	<input type="checkbox"/> Constrained by corporate sponsorship and broadcast commercialism.
Civic Equality	Platform for opposing ideologies (e.g., BJP vs. Congress, feminists vs. conservatives).	<input type="checkbox"/> Partial — social hierarchy and class privilege shape who speaks and how.
Deliberative Outcome	Generates social awareness, empathy, and advocacy for reform.	✓ <input type="checkbox"/> Achieved through awareness, though policy impact remains indirect.

Table 3 *Evaluation of Habermasian Feature*



Fraserian Counter-Publics: Expanding the Frame: Fraser's (1990) framework better illuminates the show's capacity as a "subaltern counter-public." By amplifying marginalized narratives—from caste dynamics to digital misogyny—the program challenges elite hegemony. Here, the show succeeds not through universalism, but by validating difference and making excluded identities visible within the mainstream media landscape.

Comparative Analytical Insights: Analytically, the series disrupts the traditional binary between emotion and reason. Moderators cultivate a "rational-emotional hybridity," allowing personal testimony to inform civic argument. Despite structural hierarchies, this approach expands democratic participation beyond traditional political elites, fostering a unique form of public pedagogy.

Theoretical Synthesis : The program effectively synthesizes two theoretical traditions: it utilizes the Habermasian structure of debate to facilitate Fraserian contestation. The result is a "mediated deliberative counter-public"—a hybrid space where inclusive democracy is actively performed rather than merely presumed.

Findings and Interpretative Discussion

This study analyses five episodes of NDTV's *We the People* to evaluate its role as a mediated public sphere. Drawing on Habermas (1989) and Fraser (1990), the analysis examines the intersection of rational debate, affective testimony, and journalistic mediation in facilitating inclusive political dialogue.

Key Findings

Mediated Deliberation The program functions as a structured space for civic reasoning. It reimagines Habermas's rational-critical ideal by integrating narrative and emotion, aligning closer to Fraser's pluralist conception of the public sphere.

Emotion as Political Knowledge Discussions on gender violence and online abuse demonstrate that emotional testimony serves as valid civic argument. Expressions of fear and anger function as democratic discourse, forming what Papacharissi (2015) terms affective publics.

Televised Counter-Publics The show creates a hybrid arena for counter-publics, allowing women, minorities, and youth to challenge mainstream hierarchies. These marginalized voices actively redefine public issues regarding nationalism, gender, and identity.

The Moderator as Ethical Mediator Anchors operate as civic facilitators, balancing neutrality with empathy. Their moderation ensures inclusivity, sustaining reasoned debate without silencing emotional or dissenting perspectives.

Persistent Inequalities Despite its openness, the platform reflects class and linguistic biases. The English-language framing and elite setting limit true representational parity, validating Fraser's critique that participation is often symbolic rather than equal.

Television as Civic Pedagogy The show's primary democratic function is educational rather than decisive. It positions prime-time media as a civic classroom that nurtures ethical reflection and deliberative citizenship.

Interpretative Discussion

We the People exemplifies a public sphere adapted to India's postcolonial media ecology, where rationality is embodied rather than purely abstract. Through Fraser's lens, the program's value lies in constructing overlapping counter-publics where marginalized actors contest norms. Deliberation here relies on the recognition of difference rather than the pursuit of consensus, transforming emotional discourse into civic legitimacy. Television thus becomes a site where the public sphere is performed, not merely presumed.

Limitations of the Study

Sample Size: Analysis is limited to five episodes, restricting longitudinal insight.

Linguistic Bias: The focus on English-language content excludes vernacular publics.

Impact Data: The study lacks audience reception data to assess real-world impact.

Methodology: Findings represent interpretive analysis rather than measurable outcomes.

Future Research

- Comparative analysis of televised debates across rival channels (e.g., Times Now).
- Audience-based studies examining how mediated deliberation shapes civic perception.
- Exploration of the show's online extensions as secondary digital counter-publics.
- Intersectional analyses integrating class, caste, and regional representation.

Conclusion

This study identifies NDTV's *We the People* as a resilient experiment in televised deliberative democracy. While it does not perfectly replicate Habermas's (1989) rational sphere, it successfully reinterprets these ideals to fit a contemporary, pluralistic media landscape. The program effectively translates democratic dialogue into a popular format. By convening citizens, experts, and policymakers, its structured moderation fosters the rational-critical communication essential to Habermasian principles.

Simultaneously, the show addresses Fraser's (1990) critique regarding exclusion and multiple publics. By prioritizing marginalized voices and affective narratives, the program broadens the definition of public reasoning to encompass experiential and ethical knowledge. Consequently, the show functions as a hybrid sphere where media visibility acts as civic participation. Despite persisting corporate and urban biases, it reframes postcolonial democracy not as static consensus, but as active, ongoing contestation.

The program thus establishes television as a legitimate democratic forum, balancing commercial constraints with civic values. It transforms prime-time broadcasting into a pedagogical space where citizenship is cultivated through dialogue and listening. Ultimately, *We the People* enacts democracy rather than merely reporting it. Through empathetic debate, it mirrors the complexities of the Indian public sphere—rational yet emotional, elite yet participatory—exemplifying a living practice of democratic communication.



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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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