By Dhanwanti Nayak

If you had tuned into Doordarshan News last Sunday evening, alongside the newsreader's thin summary of the movement against corruption, one tiny innocuous visual of some stragglers at Ram Lila grounds was all that was beamed. If you switched over to some private channels, you could have contrasted this visual with one of sweeping views of the crowds pouring. This may have made you wonder at the difference: Blatant censorship or blatantly propagandist. Take your pick!

But then, what else do we expect from a government channel, right? I thought it was one of the few moments to be thankful for private cable TV. Watching Doordarshan may have made you doubt whether the movement even existed or was it just a media creation by private channels as some sections of civil society and media have been claiming?

No matter which media one chose over the last week, there were reports, discussions and visuals about Hazare, Team Anna and the India against corruption movement. These differences in the coverage and objections of the same events made me think of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's book 'Manufacturing Consent' which brought our attention to the role the media played in creating public opinion.

Broadcast vs print. In India, more people depend on broadcast media, particularly TV, for news. This is even more true of the so-called 'breaking news' which can be easily watched even as it unfolds, rather than waiting for the next day's newspaper - that's the whole point of broadcast news and its great advantage over print. Herman and Chomsky showed how the media were manipulated in order to convey different 'news' or images, about 'how an underlying elite consensus largely structures all facets of the news'. For instance, right from Independence Day when Anna Hazare went for the first time to Raj Ghat prior to his beginning the fast, the wide differences in this 'neutrality' already showed. Some of the Hindi channels almost immediately covered the unplanned and unscheduled stopover of Hazare's visit, completely letting go of their regular programming. Two major English channels didn't cover him at all, and viewers watching them wouldn't have got to see Hazare sitting meditatively on the lawns with a quiet crowd gathering and seating themselves around him. Instead, one of these English channels rescheduled their programming as it found the sudden demise of Shammi Kapoor, his funeral and his old and hastily recovered film-songs even more important than 'going live' with Hazare.

At that point, one could have forgiven for interpreting this to be simply and at most a conservative editorial decision, backed by a mature wait-and-watch attitude, given that Hazare's fast could have gone either way. Those channels were creating 'the movement that was India against corruption with their almost complete coverage of the events surrounding Hazare's arrest and his subsequent release and his entry at Ram Lila grounds and so on, right? Yet, interestingly, these two English channels were also creating 'public opinion' in their own way: by retaining their original programming, they effectively said that what was happening in Ram Lila was not important.

When Anna was arrested the next morning, we again found events covered in the same fashion. If you had watched either of the latter, you could not have been faulted for thinking that nothing of importance was happening in India. Certainly not the crowds gathering and waiting patiently outside Tihar jail - powerful visuals which made such an impact on those of us who watched, the refusal of Hazare to leave jail even after he had been released until he got permission to fast and was given the Ram Lila grounds.

The point is that as members of civil society we cannot rely on one or two channels (or one language even) to get our 'news'. Private channels have also revealed their propagandist roles in the ways they have covered this movement, blurring the lines between State-owned channels and private ones. It's thus time to remember Herman and Chomsky again because for all the easy accessibility and zero-time lag of television, it's important that the image of being neutral is questioned by viewers who need an increasing degree of sophistication in watching and interpreting news shown as 'fact' on TV. While the movement is not a creation of the media, it has certainly helped in co-constituting it, not necessarily to neutral effect.