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A study on the Media narratives of environment in the regional newspapers, with special reference to the Vellalore dumpyard

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ABSTRACT

Media coverage is the prime factor and game changer when it comes to conflict management. Especially, covering and reporting environmental conflicts that are a threat to the society has always been a keen area of concern in journalistic practice. Though handled by a miniscule of journalists, it has a major impact in the society. This study identifies the framing of newspapers on the waste management issues in Vellalore dump yard . Media agenda setting theory was applied to understand the objectives of the study. News stories that appeared in the top 3 regional editions of newspapers has been taken as the samples for study. A quantitative content analysis of the news stories has been made to identify the nature of news stories, the volume of coverage, the depth of the coverage and authenticity of the information provided. Further the study utilized the narrative analysis approach to understand the over-all framing provided by the media in handling and overcoming the conflict, both to the government and to the affected general public. A wide array of findings has been listed to mix and match the loopholes in the coverage of the issue.

KEYWORDS: Health communication, crisis management, wastage dumping, pollutions, science communication, Exposure analysis, Specialized reporting.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Waste is always a major by-product of human development. With the increasing population and vast economic activity, more waste is being generated especially in the cities. Poor management of waste through a longer period may result in a greater impact on the environment, health and society. According to Meyers et al.¹, inappropriate solid waste (SW) management causes air, soil and water pollution leading not only to environmental degradation but also to a growing catalogue of human health problems. Irresponsible SW management may contaminate surface and ground water supplies. In industrial and urban areas, washing “away” SW can clog drains, creating stagnant water for insect breeding and potential for floods in rainy seasons. Irresponsible burning and incineration have a significant influence on air pollution. Organic wastes dumped in landfills generate greenhouse gases, and untreated leachate pollutes surrounding soil and water bodies such as ground water.

Grodzińska-Jurczak and Read² stated that it will not be possible to fully implement the principles of sustainable waste management (particularly segregation of secondary materials, hazardous wastes, electronics and batteries, recycling, composting, decrease of municipal solid waste generated) without the active participation of wider society.

Health Crisis and Management – An Introduction

Health hazards are the main threats to a society, wherein the society faces a mass infection due to some hazardous diseases. They incur a sudden panic in the society due to the insecure feeling created out of those diseases and infections and a rise in death toll or a change in the routine of the society, fear of physical interaction etc., The most common diseases that promote these are epidemic and endemic diseases like cholera, malaria, dengue, swine flu and chikungunya. These diseases spread through agents like water and air that are common elements and hence spread in a speedy manner. They pose a threat to the normal functioning of the society and create unrest.

Managing these in the initial stage can help the society from undergoing turmoil and witness. Mainly, this can be brought about by media which can provide the information on the precautionary measures to be followed, easier ailments for those diseases if infected, the whereabouts to approach for treatment, the government plans on controlling the crisis can be provided. Health reporting has its own constraints in India. India has witnessed a lot of health crisis ranging from the plague of Gujarat (1994), chikungunya which invariably affected the southern states of India and the recent dengue which is inviting the attention of the globe. Hence an active role of the regional media in providing valid, accurate, relevant, impartial and authentic public health information at times of health crisis, suggesting preventive measures and setting a clear agenda in managing and overcoming the crisis are considered vital.

Waste management issues and majorly, environmental issues are at its alarming levels in India. A recent report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) ranked several Indian cities, including New Delhi, among top 20 most polluted cities globally (The Times of India, 2015).

Media role in Disaster reporting

Covering tragedy and human suffering is at the heart of what journalist's do. The role of journalism in a disaster is a relatively recent field of study. "The range of the approach has progressed impressively from the original objectives to the counting and description of audiences and the measurement of direct effects on those exposed to communication" McQuail 1969³. It is now fairly well established what media do when disaster strikes. The media hear of the event, try to obtain more information, use their own files to add background to their stories, dispatch reporters and report anything they are told. Often they devote all their air time or much of the space available to that single story Scanlon and Alldred, 1982⁴. On such occasions, the media will also use its technical resources and ingenuity to gather information. All media monitor what their competitors are reporting and copy it if they think it is newsworthy. There are also many interconnections among the media.

In his review of the behavior of mass communications systems in disasters, Quarantelli concluded that passing on warnings is "Without doubt, the clearest and most consistent role [of mass media] in a disaster Quarantelli, 1991, p. 23⁵. Warnings are effective only if they are specific about the threat, specific about that is affected and specific about what to do and – because persons hearing a warning from one source are inclined to check with another – they are effective only if they come from all possible sources. But as Schudson has colorfully proposed, when "shit happens, journalists gain some freedom from official opinions, professional routines, and conventional wisdom" Schudson 2010, 254⁶. The stories that appear on the paper are a product of the journalist's freedom.

But the content and the framing of the article can change or alter the actual conflict in different ways. In this, Blood comments "The inclusion or exclusion of a single fact can change the entire context of a reported incident and lead the reader to draw vastly different conclusions. The same facts, presented in a different order or described using different words, can convey vastly different messages Blood, 2004⁷".

Addressing the issues faced by the society is the prime focus of the media. Especially, media coverage of the environmental issues can help the readers understand the concepts and idealize their perspectives. Media framing of the real nature of the issues can bring about a change in the issue. But according to Pompper 2004⁸, the mainstream newspapers used frames that relied heavily on government and industrial sources where voices of the common people were suppressed. A study by Kostarella et al.⁹ found that there is reduced reliability in the Greek media with regard to the quality

of environmental information. Francis did a content analysis of four newspapers in Kerala – the Malayala Manorama, the Mathru Bhoomi, The Hindu and The New Indian Express. He found that the crime stories dominated all the sampled newspapers and agriculture stories were covered least. Boykoff indicated that climate change stories in the English language Indian print media coverage peaked around the time of summits in Copenhagen and Cancun. Many studies have focused on how environmental issues in newspapers are being framed. Framing is widely used by the researchers in analyzing the news articles. Semetko and Valkenburg 2000¹⁰ analyzed Dutch newspapers and identified generic frames based on previous research. The result indicated the Responsibility frame was found to be the most prevalent frame followed by the Economic frame. The prominence of the Responsibility frame shows the importance of political context in the framing of problems in the news.

Problems and challenges in health crisis management

Although the trend is changing, science reporting is not a daily routine even now in most media houses worldwide. Science reporting - unlike sports, politics, business, arts and culture – is generally placed on the fringes of mainstream journalism. Close analysis shows that there are various deep-rooted factors that tend to keep science at the bottom of newsgathering, packing and dissemination. The main problem a journalist faces in health reporting is the sources. Journalists, due to lack of time or for many other reasons, do not look for specialized sources. Common sources are the governmental agencies, related departments and common public. The environmental challenges of the 21st century will be far more subtle, demanding, and global than in the past. They range from questions on how chemicals may be altering our genetic make-up to the long-term ramifications of climate change and related natural hazard preparedness to adaptation measures. The issues are becoming more complex, and a number of advocates with competing stakes make it more difficult to communicate what is happening to the environment. Understanding the facts and making judgments has become critical. This is the most crucial task for journalists working on the environmental “beat,” because they are the ones communicating these issues to the general public. In this high-stakes milieu of environmental reporting, the main aim is to better portray the contours of the varied aspects of environmental change, as better reporting has critical implications for understanding, meaning, and potential public engagement Boykoff¹².

Environmental journalism carries an array of possible meanings and often embraces several at once. It can be considered an advocate’s beat, journalism with a purpose, or simply journalism about the environment. Elements of science and health reporters’ beat also play a part in the environmental journalist’s job Rademakers 2004¹³.

Often, the literature on environmental journalism leads one to the literature on science and risk communication, with the latter further delving into the literature on environmental communication.

Hence, both inseparable, environmental and health journalism requires a strong knowledge of related scientific terminologies and affair analyzing pattern of what to be reported and what not to be said when going public.

Solid waste dumping is the major issue faced in India, especially in the cities with the growth in population and more waste creation. With lesser care given to waste disposal and management, the dumping of waste in the outskirts of the city has been the regular practice of the municipal corporations. Vellalore dumpyard, in Coimbatore, a city in southern India has been gaining importance in the same lines. Initiated in the 1980s and after, to manage the problems of then existing Kavundampalayam dumpyard, Vellalore is facing the same issue due to increase in population. With around 25,000 people living around the dumpyard (2011-19 census), the area faces the dump of around 10 lakh residents of the Coimbatore city (2011-19 census). A major factor in this is 70% of the dump in this area is bio-medical waste from the hospitals of Coimbatore.

The illegal disposal of the hazardous waste in open, has created a lot of health issues. Though people of the area has protested against the dumping of waste and even after a Green Tribunal order to identify a suitable alternate location for dumpyard, the Coimbatore corporation is continuing dumping waste.

Underlying the above-mentioned importance of media in the reporting of environmental issues, the study intends to understand the framing of vellalore dumpy ad issue in regional newspapers of Tamil nadu. The study works on the underlying objectives:

1. To examine how the regional newspapers of Coimbatore has covered the issue.
2. To understand the framing provided by the newspapers on the issue.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study works on the media framing theory. As many media researchers have noted, media framing focuses on the specific ways issues are presented and how the public issues are expressed to the audience (Gamson and Modigliani], Tankard et al., Entman). According to Entman, the four general functions of framing are problem definition (determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits), problem diagnosis (identify the forces creating the problem), moral judgments (evaluate causal agents and effects) and remedies to the problem (offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effect). These four functions can coexist in the same media presentation, and all four may not be present in every frame (Sieff).

METHODOLOGY USED

Content Analysis of the articles that appeared in the leading Tamil News dailies was employed to study the importance given to the issue in news dailies. A coding sheet was used to analyze the characteristics and the framing of news stories. They are identified as four frames in the study as political, sensational, governmental and environmental frame. The content of study included the news stories that appeared in three leading news dailies over a period of three months. The selection was purely based on the findings of Indian Readership Survey (IRS). The dailies included Dinamalar, Daily Thanthi and The Hindu. The articles in the form of news, editorial, photograph, column and factsheets, related to the issue published within the period were taken for study. The analysis included the size, space allocated, employment of photographs and other allied elements. Then, the content present in those articles were analyzed for the frames provided by the newspapers on the issue and the discourse given by the news setters towards the issue.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A total of 88 articles were published on the issue altogether from the three news dailies, wherein the space allocated for the articles counted to 10% of the total space.

Regarding the type of story, 47 articles were news items, 23 photographs and 11 editorials and 7 columns.

Analyzing the length of the articles, 5 stories were above 800 words, 13 containing 400-800 words and the rest 70 stories are less than 400 words.

Looking at the attribution of the articles, 47 were by the staff reporters 7 were named with columnists and 3 wire service stories were present. Generally, a newswire service tends to report news in the most objective way possible.

Analyzing the framing provided by the articles, 37 were providing sensational frames wherein 9 articles provided developmental frame, providing preventive measures and the rest 11 focused on environmental aspects for the issues. Most of the information provided again was irrelevant.

No sources of the waste dumped were stated, with all the actors in the cause of the issue viz, hospitals, companies that dump waste were not mentioned.

CONCLUSION

The study provided the sad state of affairs of the practice of environmental journalism in Tamilnadu. This may be a short-term scenario, but considering the mass audience involved, there must be a change made in the practicing of health journalism in Tamil nadu. The analyses clearly predicted more of a political, sensational frame given to the issue, commenting on the activities of government and health department. No due importance was given to the life of people affected,

preventive measures to be undertaken and on the ways to manage and overcome the issue. This may be due to the lack of scientific knowledge among the journalists, as our study provided the fact that there are no proper training programs or associations available for journalists in the state. Since the study was short-spanned, in-depth analysis of the articles was not made, and no opinion has been collected from the journalists practicing environmental journalism regarding the issues. But, with new environmental and health issues popping day-by-day, the need for a healthy practice in health journalism stands the need for the hour. We are not too late, but an earlier step can make things straight, which can be initiated by the governments. We can educate ourselves to educate the world.

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