

Environment as News: An Analysis on the Challenges in

Environmental Reporting

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to examine how media shapes and affect peoples' attitudes and understanding on environmental issues. Environment has become a major concern all over the world and India is among the extreme risk countries in terms of climate change and environmental risk. Given that the media can play an important role in creating awareness on environment, it is worth analyzing i) whether mass media promote environment apathy or not and ii) how media communicates environment. It is not only important to assess the quantum of information on environment in the media but it is equally pertinent to study how individuals structure and negotiate meaning on such reports. This study examines the role of media in environmental communication and the social construction and interpretation of such news reports. Furthermore, this study investigates the factors that influence media coverage and promotion of environment. Finally, this paper argues that more coverage on environmental issues are necessary if we are to foster broader understanding, acceptance and appreciation of environmental reports among the public.

Keywords: *Media, environmental communication, news reports, social construction*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid innovations and expansion in new scientific breakthroughs have taken humankind into a new age today. While technological developments have been a boon for humanity, it has its devastating effect as well. In such a tantalizing scenario, there is an urgent need to create awareness on environmental issues among the masses. Bavadam (2010, p.3) points out that there are issues that most people do not think are important as they do not impact people's lives and so nobody sees environmental issues as their responsibility. Today climate change has become a major concern all over the world and India is among the extreme risk countries in terms of climate change and environmental risk. The annual release of British risk consultancy Maplecroft's 'Climate Change and Environmental Risk Atlas' reveal that 31 percent of global economic output will be based in countries facing extreme risks from the impacts of Climate change by 2025.

Contemporary environmental challenges permeate the very material and discursive fabric of our lives weaving through every spheres of human endeavour. Today public perceptions of environmental problems are discoursed not only in academics but in political circles as well. This epitomizes the urgency that environmental issues

surmount with. At the national level of politics environmental protection forms the basis of debates, but implementation still remains a distant dream. In India, in the post-independence period our attitude was dominated by developmental growth and we did not have a culture of pollution control. The total insensitivity at the bureaucratic level, which persists still, has given the nation a very heavy backlog of pollution and ecological degradation (Bandhu, p.100).

There is a strong scientific consensus that the global climate is changing and that human activity contributes significantly. Although media interventions seek to enhance understanding of complex and dynamic human-environment interactions, vague and decontextualized reporting instead can enhance bewilderment. Nonetheless, media reports conflate the vast and varied terrain from environmental science to governance, from consensus to debate, as unified issues. Disagreement and dissention certainly have value in reshaping understanding. However, when these are not effectively placed in context within the larger currents of scientific views from convergence to contention, public understanding of these issues suffers. Corbett and Durfee (2004) examined coverage of climate change with a focus on uncertainty. Through an experimental design of three newspaper story treatments, they found that greater contextualization within climate science stories helps to mitigate controversy stirred up through uncertainty.

Media researchers on environment have used content analysis to assess media coverage on environmental issues in the print media, such as counting articles, measuring columns, and measuring trends in coverage of environmental issues (Atwater, Salwen, & Anderson, 1985). Furthermore, in a recent study of environmental reporting, Anderson (1991) used semi-structured open-ended interviews of professionals to understand how environmental pressure groups influence the media's environmental agenda. Recently, researchers have used text analysis to understand how environmental issues are presented in the media. This line of inquiry is based on the assumption that the analysis of meaning and ideology embedded in media texts is best undertaken from a semiological approach that focuses on text as a conversation (Woollacott, 1982).

It is believed that the media play a strategic role in the social construction of environmental concern (Schoenfeld, Meier & Griffin 1979). However, there are not much studies done to examine how individuals negotiate and interpret environmental messages in the media. It has long been argued that public perceptions of environmental issues depend primarily on the mass media (Downs, 1972), but the effect of the media on the popular consciousness depends on how such reports are interpreted by the viewers. Whether mass media promote environment apathy or not and how media communicates environment needs to be examined.

Similarly Bavadam (2010, p.6) argues that due to the critical nature of environmental issues journalists find themselves having to refine the most sacrosanct of journalistic principles – objectivity. It is not only necessary to assess the quantum of information on environment in the media but it is equally pertinent to understand how individuals structure and negotiate meaning on such reports. We need to understand how such news reports are socially constructed and interpreted and the factors that influence media coverage and promotion of environment. It is argued that more coverage on environmental issues are necessary if we are to foster broader understanding, acceptance and appreciation of environmental reports among the public.

Given the rising commercialization of media and commoditization of information, news must have a buyer (Allan, 2004). Media coverage of science news reports are often done in a complex way and is not designed in a manner that would appeal to as many people as possible. Thus it is reported in a more complicated way and

therefore, it has fewer readers as it does not attract them at all. This is something most media are aware of especially when they understand that they have to compete with other media houses in terms of wider reach among the masses. It is also a consequence of an ever-fragmenting audience brought about by media liberalization and competition. The limited coverage could also be a result of modest knowledge of science and technology within the media (Stocking, 1999).

There is a strong belief in Journalism that a story need to have newsworthiness, but then what constitutes 'newsworthiness' is something which is questionable and any advocacy that any news should have such values which is significant and relevant seems to be a bizarre proposition particularly because there is nothing irrelevant or insignificant. Representations of the environment via mass media shape people's perceptions and considerations for action. In this high stakes milieu of environmental reporting, journalists and editors as well as scientists and policy makers need to be extremely sensitive about the environment.

Media interventions should further people's understanding of the complex and dynamic human-environment interaction. However, vague and decontextualized reporting instead can enhance bewilderment. Nonetheless, media reports conflate the vast and varied terrain from environmental science to governance, from consensus to debate, as unified issues. The media are for many readers the only accessible source of information about science and technology (Nelkin, 2001). People understand science news the way it is reported, interpreted and presented. It is a fact that science reports particularly environmental issues are among the areas that the media do not pay much attention. This is based on a pre-emptive assumption that there is less interest among the audience particularly because science news is generally difficult to understand.

III. MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

Environment has become a major concern all over the world and India is among the extreme risk countries in terms of climate change and environmental risk. Given that the media can play an important role in creating awareness on environment, it is worth understanding i) whether mass media promote environment apathy or not, ii) how media communicates environment and iii) the challenges involved in environmental reporting. It is of utmost importance to understand how individuals reinforce one's attitude on environmental coverage and negotiate meaning on such reports.

The rapid movement towards industrialization and technological advancement which have resulted in depletion of environmental resources cannot be reversed unless there is collective thinking and concerted effort. Environment protection and improvement is a task of such a magnitude that no government or group however resourceful or knowledgeable can accomplish it successfully without involvement of the masses. Thus, efforts are required to effectively create awareness on environmental issues which could be enhanced through the mass media. In this scenario environmental communicators should seek to harness this powerful force aimed at informing and changing public opinion via mass media.

While environmental communication fundamentally question the ways how the environment is reported, extensive media coverage could contribute to an individual's level of understanding on environment issues. The media should reach out to the masses with greater responsibility and conscientiousness Pegu (2014). Environmental issues should be given coverage from a wider perspective – its implications and the global inequities of climate change. Ironically, there are scant coverage on environment in the media. There has been a

sustained engagement by the media across the world by and large, yet the challenges for the journalists remain, given the manner in which media operates. In a way journalistic norms of skepticism have perhaps made environment reporting all the more challenging. It requires nothing less than a revolution in our sense of civic responsibility.

The reasons why environment finds little or no space in the media are manifold. Perhaps environment does not qualify to be a 'breaking news' (whatever that means). It is a fact that the media thrives on sensational news stories not only in India but elsewhere. Media which is insensitive to issues of global concern particularly the environment certainly needs to be interrogated. News coverage of any issue is by and large shaped by other factors such as time and space limitations, news format requirements, editorial control, human interest and commercial pressures etc. In this aspect news selection by the media houses becomes extremely difficult. Such factors argue Anderson, Petersen and David (2005) serve to frame stories in ways that are likely to connect with readers interests but sometimes appear to non-journalists to distort or misrepresent science.

The role of mass media in communicating climate change has been characterized by a long period of passivity and alarmism (Andreas & Smith, 2007). It is seen that media coverage of climate change across the globe has increased since the late 1980's and has gained momentum from the early 2000. However, there has been a gap between scientific consensus of human induced climate change and a sustained engagement by the media across the world. Journalistic norms and conventions act as a deterrent in environmental reporting. In a way journalistic norms of skepticism have undermined the consensus of climate change scientists (Andreadis et al, 2007).

We need to fundamentally question the current ways of understanding the environment which situates people's interactions with the environment. Awareness on the hazards of environmental pollution in everyday life could be another factor contributing to an individual's level of understanding on environment issues. Although the coverage on environmental news has increased over the years, we are yet to achieve the desired level of communicating environment in a more meaningful way. The journalists need to be sensitized in order to reach out to the masses with greater responsibility and conscientiousness.

While there are commendable efforts in creating awareness on environmental issues in India, yet, the insensitivity at the bureaucratic level which still persist, has given the nation a very heavy backlog of pollution and ecological degradation" (Bandhu, p.100). The Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) has carried out massive awareness drive on environment through the media. The Ministry has also formed a "Media Action Plan" (Annual Report MoEF, 2007-08). There has to be a sustained effort in order to bring about an attitudinal change amongst people by spreading awareness about environmental issues in a positive manner. These objectives are sought to be achieved through the electronic and print media, the film and theatre media, etc.

Some of the notable programmes initiated by MoEF are 'Bhoomi', a weekly environmental television magazine which was broadcast on Doordarshan National Channel. This was done by the nodal agencies and district coordinators of the National Green Corps Programme for onward distribution and screening in various schools. Besides, 'Sarokar', a television magazine covering various environmental issues such as community effort in environmental protection, water conservation, water pollution, afforestation, wind power, bio-medical waste, bio-diesel, air pollution relating to Rajasthan. Staging of street plays title 'Khuli Hawa Ki Talaash Mein' by Centre for Education and Voluntary Action for spreading awareness on environmental degradation was done in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, J&K, Rajasthan, Delhi, Kolkata and Chandigarh. In 2007, Vatavaran, a

competition on Environment and Wildlife Film Festival was held at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi with entries from 18 foreign countries.

Zee News in 2012 launched India's biggest environmental awareness campaign 'My Earth My Duty' to create awareness on global warming. Media professionals from across the spectrum hailed the initiative as a successful step towards enlightening the masses towards saving the environment and becoming socially conscious. According to S. Yesudas, MD, Vizeum, "Although social and environmental causes have got a commercial angle too, but it does create a mass awareness when adopted by a leading TV channel like Zee News".

The media can propagate better information on environment that is reflective on the issues and problems on climate change. News coverage of any issue is by and large shaped by innumerable factors such as news format requirements, editorial control, human interest, policy activity on an issue, commercial pressures, resonance with and relevance to audiences and controversy. In this aspect news selection by the media houses becomes extremely difficult. Moreover, little competence or lack of specialized knowledge of environmental issues, make reportage on the environment all the more challenging. In such a situation, it is important that the media houses seek expert knowledge and cultivate relationships with scientists, which will enhance better coverage of science news. Employing people with knowledge of science and technology may help media organizations avoid misreporting of science issues.

III. ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING

Environmental reporting has always been a major challenge in Journalism for innumerable reasons. There is an apprehension that it is an insurmountable challenge to effectively communicate environment via the mass media. It becomes problematic because of the complexities of time and spatial scales which is done under commercial considerations. These portrayals are what are typically valued by policy makers, mass media and the citizens. The media in India is an all-powerful entity which can set the agenda of what need to be discourse at the highest political level. Surprisingly such issues do not gain much momentum just like any other policy debates.

The increasing reach of mass media have brought a tremendous change in every spheres of human endeavour. It has played an important role in translation of information and developments between communities, such as science and the public. While public perceptions of environmental issues depend primarily on the mass media (Downs, 1972), the effect of the media on the popular consciousness depends on how the content is interpreted by the viewers. Some studies have documented that mass media coverage on the environment fosters public opinion, political action, and protest (Lowe & Morrison 1984). Others have argued that the media usually promotes apathy and cynicism rather than active citizenship (Gamson, 1992). However, it is still not very clear in what readers socially construct the meaning of media texts. Science and technology are among the areas that the media often pay little attention to. This is based on numerous factors one of them being the assumption that there is little audience interest particularly because science is generally difficult to understand both for journalists and audiences.

While new innovations and technologies have captured media attention, many issues relating to the environment are hardly understood and as such not given adequate coverage. This is true in India where there is no critical mass of journalists with specialized scientific and technological expertise; and where there is a lack of skills

necessary for onward dissemination of such information to disparate audiences as news, features and other texts. Several factors determine media coverage one of the commonest factors is that it must be newsworthy, and that it must interest a large number of people. In other words, it must appeal by speaking to the news values of significance and relevance (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

Despite the above arguments, however, some issues are often given a wide berth especially when they are considered complex or of little interest to the majority of society (Stocking, 1999). Unfortunately, science and technology are among the areas that the media often pay little attention to. This is based on numerous factors one of them being the assumption that there is little audience interest particularly because science is generally and technology are generally difficult to understand both for journalists and audiences.

In such a situation, environmental reporting gets blurred and as such it can be particularly troubling when covering a complex issue such as climate-change science and policy (Weingart, 2002). While, deadlines and space considerations constrain journalists, editorial preferences and publisher pressures can affect news reporting (Schoenfeld et al. 1979). Moreover, the amount of exposure and placement of news items in the newspapers as well as the use of headlines and photographs which are often editorial decisions can also affect how events and situations are construed by the public.

Earlier work in media studies of the environment has examined the increasing attention paid to environmental issues through varying factors in constructing environmental issues as social problems (Schoenfeld et al. 1979). Mass media represent a key arena where such claims are communicated as well as contested and negotiated. In this mix of pressures and influences, a particular challenge to media coverage of climate-change science and policy, along with many other factors gains salience and thus warrants further discussion.

IV. CHALLENGES IN ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING

Corporate media structures and media ownership patterns are overarching factors that have driven the production of news content in most media houses. While deadlines and space have continued to constrain journalists, editorial preferences have also affected news reporting. These issues intersect with processes, such as journalistic norms and values, to further shape news content. News coverage of any issue is by and large shaped by innumerable factors such as time and space limitations, news format requirements, editorial control, human interest, policy activity on an issue, commercial pressures, resonance with and relevance to audiences and controversy. In this aspect news selection by the media houses becomes extremely difficult. Some of the issues and challenges associated with environmental reporting are as follows:

- Media organizations lack an explicit policies mandating or providing guidance on the coverage of environment. This demonstrates that while such policies may be lacking, media managers, editors and journalists believe that environment news would make good reading or if there is sufficient public interest.
- Media seek to cover issues they think would attract most number of people as news is increasingly becoming commoditized and finding a buyer in a competitive commercial media environment becomes difficult.
- Environmental news are either inadequately covered, or that the coverage is not meaningfully informed. The coverage of environmental issues are coupled with problems due to various factors including the quality of coverage brought about by little competence or lack of specialized knowledge, in environmental issues.

- The minimal coverage that environment receive can be attributed to lack of interest by media houses in enhancing the competencies of the journalists to write stories on environment more comprehensively.
- The inability of journalists to file effective environmental reporting is in part ascribed to gaps in journalism training. This is because there is often little or no balance between what is taught and practiced. The focus is more on the craft of journalism and institutes offering Mass Communication and Journalism in India do not place emphasis on science communication.
- This happens in many journalism schools and institutions in India where the focus is on acquiring skills to practice journalism rather than on acquiring deeper knowledge on any issues be it environment or health issues.
- Even when journalists have the knowledge of environment, media houses may have little space to accommodate such news stories and as such journalists would have no interest in environmental reporting if it is irrelevant in their workplace.
- Encouraging public debate about environmental issues through the media would provide a platform for articulation of public opinion.

V. CONCLUSION

Communicating environmental issues in a way that are meaningful remains one of the critical issues for mediaeducatorsand journalists today. Given the fact that environmental issues do not seem to evoke much interest, it therefore becomesvery difficult to attract people.More comprehensive environmental coverage is critically necessary if we are to foster broader public understanding and appreciation of environmental issues. There are varied reasons for the dearth of environmental issues in the Indian media. Foremost among them is that environmental issues are often considered complex or that journalists in India lack specialized knowledge and competence to report them. This is due to the limited competence within many newsrooms in Indian and the effort by the media in trying to improve the capacity of journalists in writingenvironmental issues in a more meaningful way.Furthermore, the media industry should work closely with training institutions to introduce science curricula as a way of improving the understanding of science issues. Such an effort and foundation is crucial to long-term interest in the field and improvement in science communication particularly environment news. Furthermore, it is important for media organizations to invest in people with science and technology backgrounds rather than those with only journalistic knowledge and skills. It is also important that the media and editors seek expert knowledge and cultivate relationships with scientists, which will enhance coverage of science and technology in general and the media in particular.

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