

A Study on the Framing of Climate Change Stories in Tamil Regional Newspapers

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Abstract

Environment and allied issues are gaining importance in the day to day affairs. With the increasing number of environmental issues and conflicts, much more attention is required both at the general public and governing ends. Especially climate change has become the most debatable issue in the recent times. In this juncture, media serves as the conduit in sharing the information knowledge between the two ends. This study tries to understand the role of regional print media in the representation of climate change. Structured on framing analysis method based on the Framing theory by Goffman, data is collected with the help of structured coding sheet. Stories on climate change that appeared in three prominent newspapers of Tamil Nadu Dinamalar, Dinamani and Daily Thanthi in the period of June – December 2019 have been taken as the sample of study. The findings suggested that most of the newspapers are focused on political frames and economic frames while less importance was given to scientific and responsibility frames. The study also identified that the news stories intensified the issue instead of informing and educating people on the same.

Keywords: Environmental journalism, climate change, global warming, pollutions, science communication, Exposure analysis, Specialised reporting, co2 emissions.

Introduction

Media representation of any issue is most important in the current society. The agenda set by the media influences the public in the decision making process on the issues. Especially, when the point of discussion is environment, media plays a vital role. Environment at the global level is deteriorating. The number of issues that pop out every day pose a topic of debate. At this juncture, role of media in disseminating information on the issues, aftermaths and safety measures is much needed. Media's role in the promulgation of policies and making people understanding the importance of environment preservation is the need of the hour. But, from observations made, media have never given needed importance to majority of the issues. The focus has always been on the english-speaking communities. Narrowing down to India, environmental coverage in newspapers is still very less. There were bits and pieces of coverage scattered across the daily newspapers which focus on media. Even these stories focus on the business values rather than focusing on the issues at the grassroot levels.

There are a range of environmental issues that are pertaining in India since long periods. Water pollution is termed the predominant issue in India as it has serious aftereffects. More than 70% of the water resources in India are contaminated by organic and inorganic pollutants, resulting in making it unusable, increasing the water scarcity (Murty and Kumar, 2011). Air pollution and air quality have been deteriorating with the increase in industries and CO emissions due to more vehicles. A recent report by Skymet, a private weather forecasting agency has stated that Delhi is one of the most polluted cities in the world.

Climate change has gained prominence in the past decade throughout the world as the major threat to environment. The issue involves more scientific knowledge and understanding than any other issue reported and hence the communication on the same needs to be more accurate. Precise use of data and jargons will be much helpful to prevent the harmful impact of the issues. Hence, only media can help in providing the needed information and meaning of the issue to the general public. Carvalho states that news media serve as the most important agents in the production, reproduction and transformation of the meaning. The public get most of the information in a mediated form. (Carvalho, 2010).

The amount of environmental coverage is gaining more prominence nowadays. Mainly, English newspapers allocate more space to cover environmental issues against Tamil newspapers. Apparently, a difference in coverage and focus is present. Existing studies on environmental news coverage have focused only on newspapers at the national level. But it is only the regional newspaper that reaches the grassroots level and hence there is a need to analyze the regional language press in informing and communicating environmental issues. The research on regional newspapers is very limited and hence this study focuses on analysing the regional newspaper content on environment with specific reference to climate change news stories.

The main objectives of the study include:

1. To measure the level of coverage of climate change in Tamil regional newspapers.
2. To identify the various frames handled while reporting environmental stories.
3. To identify the nature of frames used in climate change stories.

Newspaper representation of environmental issues

Media coverage of environmental issues is vital in dissemination of information to general public. It provides the clear understanding of the issue and further action. But on the real side, in many newspapers, there are no specialized reporters covering environment. Environment stories are covered by the reporters handling general beat, whose lack of scientific knowledge remains a threat to accurate reporting. Various studies have been made on the Framing method of Newspapers on environmental issues. Researchers mainly employ Framing analysis in newspaper research. A research by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) on Dutch newspapers identified generic frames based on previous research. Responsibility frame was found to be the most prevalent frame followed by the Economic frame in their research. The prominence of the Responsibility frame shows the significance of political context in the framing of problems in the news. Ostman and Parker (1987) in their study on the impact of education, age, newspapers and television on environmental knowledge, concerns and behaviors found that the use of newspapers for environmental information was related positively to attention to environmental content in mass media and level of environmental concerns. A study by T.Sekar (1981) on the role of newspapers in creating concern with environmental issues in India has identified that a media cover environmental issues with sufficient intensity with scope and time. The accompanied survey also revealed a much limited role of newspapers in creating a mass concern. Dispensa and Brulle in their 2003 study on conclude that the stories to be published are decided by the reporters on the newsworthiness of the story which is also often affected by the sense of objectivity, prime source of information and the biasness of the company. Another research by Agwu and Amu in 2013 have identified that most of the news stories on environment carried a 'negative framing'. Cox, in 2006 states that without frames, news stories stay incomprehensible and unrecognizable and void of context.

A study by Dutt, Garg and Bhatta (2013) analysed the environmental coverage in 31 prominent English-language Indian newspapers for the quantification and thematic representation. The results highlighted the prominence of global warming and climate change, though other stories were published. These two found to fill the two-third of the total space of coverage of environmental is-

sues. The impact of global warming and climate change was the most prominent frame, followed by those on mitigation.

Knowledge of journalists on environment and allied terminologies is also considered vital. A study by Abbas and Ogadimma on the content analysis of Omani newspapers on environmental issues strongly recommends an adequate training and education on environmental and science reporting that could enhance their indepth investigation of issues rather than a formal straight news story.

Methodology

Keeping the literature in mind, the study employed framing analysis as the method of study. News stories on climate change that appeared in Dinamani, Dinamalar and Daily thanthi over a period of six months from June 2019 to December 2019 were taken for evaluation. Five frames been derived from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)'s study: The Responsibility frame, Conflict frame, Economic frame, Political frame, Biodiversity frame and Adjudication frame have been observed across the categories. A total of 178 stories qualified the criteria and were analysed on the above said parameters. A collection of 25 scientific keywords related to climate change were developed and the stories were analysed on the keywords to identify the usage of scientific knowledge in the stories.

Results

The study helped identifying the prominent frames of climate change in three newspapers viz, Dinamalar, Daily Thanthi and Dinamani. The study also identified the quantified elements of coverage: the length of the story, type of story and attribution.

Analysing the amount of coverage of stories in each of the newspapers, Dinamani ranked first with 75 stories and Dinamalar carried 58 stories with Daily Thanthi presenting a least number of 45 stories. Identifying the type of stories revealed that almost 80% of the stories appeared as hard news and very less importance was given to columns and features. Dinamani had more number of stories on National importance, while Dinamalar gave importance to local stories whereas Daily Thanthi carried more foreign news drawn from news agencies. Further, the analysis of keywords present in the stories revealed a sad fact that only Dinamani has used the keywords to an extent (58%), while Dinamalar and Daily Thanthi carried a very less percentage of scientific terms. A lack of scientific knowledge of the reporters is identified as the reason for the same.

Frames identified

A simple coding of frames has been done by understanding the story and counts were recorded to measure the frames present in the story. 'Political' and 'Economic' frames dominated the score while less importance was given to 'Adjudication' and 'Responsibility' frames. 'Conflict' frames were identified in many of the stories where there is government involvement in the story. Lack of scientific knowledge among the reporters is a prime concern for very less coverage of 'Scientific frames'.

Conclusion

Environmental coverage in the media helps readers understand the issues clearly and develop perspectives. Mostly environmental stories are portrayed as political and economic issues. Government authorities and political leaders are represented majorly, which focuses the story towards policymakers. This clearly shows that the voice of public lacks importance. Although climate change is covered in the newspapers, lack of scientific approach is a drawback. Absence of specialized report-

ers for environmental coverage and lack of scientific knowledge is seen as a reason. Hence, the study has revealed that more importance should be given to scientific reporting of environmental stories and public must be made aware of the nuances of environmental issues. Knowledge gap identification and bridging the same among the reporters covering environment can be done.

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