

REPORTING GREEN; AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF NEWS COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN SRI LANKAN NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

This research seeks to explore the news coverage of environmental issues in Sri Lankan newspapers in three languages; The Sunday Times, Irida Lankadeepa, and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu. In order to carry out the objectives of the research, qualitative and quantitative methodology were employed. The researcher tries to find the answers to the problem whether Sri Lankan newspapers cover sufficiently environmental issues. Primary data were collected through content analysis. The agenda setting approach was the theoretical framework for the study. The research concluded that Sri Lankan newspapers do cover environmental issues, though the subject matter did not receive much coverage. Although environmental issues are not covered sufficiently in these three newspapers, it is concluded that The Sunday Times newspaper covered the highest environmental articles by contract to other two newspapers; Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu in 2014. The ways of prominence given for environmental issues in these three newspapers were different considerably. In terms of the extent of coverage, types of environmental issues, level of prominence (nature of the story, item, placement, space and trends), it is evident that The Sunday Times newspaper has given the significant representation or considerable coverage for environmental related issues than other two other newspapers. In Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu, environmental issues were not only ignored, but also (if covered) they were given very small portions of the newspaper and marginalized in relation to their presentation.

Keywords: Agenda Setting Theory, Environment, Environmental Issues, Environmental Journalism, News Coverage

1. Introduction

Tremendous environmental problems and issues are gradually increasing around the world with higher frequency from strong typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones and other extreme events including pollution, floods, landslides, droughts etc. Therefore, there is a growing demand from the public for more and more information on environmental issues and a great link between awareness or knowledge and action. It is shown that environment and environmental news and information are salient and prominent topic of the public and elites discussion. Hence, mass media plays a significant role in covering news and information on environmental incidences, issues and problems (Pompper, 2004; Signorielli, 1993).

A Number of studies have shown that mass media is a powerful tool that have been and can continue to be used to effect of social change. According to Marx's argument, mass media, known as a 'means of production' which disseminate the ideas and world views are an agent of ideological control (Marx & Engels (as cited by Chandler, 2014)). Specifically, news reports play an important role in shaping the public's perceptions of the government's efforts to address the environmental issues and resolve the environmental problems. The media not only reports on the environment related events, it also lets people know how officials respond and what to do to protect themselves from environmental problems. The media also helps to keep people informed about the day-to-day progress of efforts to protect the environment, recycling programs and efforts to conserve natural resources. This is how the public educates through

mass media. The mass media play a role as a channel and means for environmental education of people in the world (Hoerisch, 2002; SLEJF, 2008). Among the mass media, newspaper takes an important place in disseminating information, shape perceptions and create awareness and thus, catalyse environmental actions.

In general, the term 'environment' is a "concept which includes all aspects of the surroundings of humanity, affecting individuals and social groupings" (Gilpin, 1996). The 'environment' or 'natural environment' is all of those non-human, natural surroundings within which human beings exist and which is a prerequisite for their further evolution.'

Environmental communication is the "pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as human relationships to the natural world; it is the symbolic medium that human use in constructing environmental problems and in negotiating society's different responses to them". According to Development Cooperation and Environment (DCE), environmental communication is the planned and strategic use of communication processes and media products to support effective policymaking, public participation and project implementation geared towards environmental sustainability. Environmental Journalism can be explained as exploring risks and hazards and translating complex scientific issues into simple language and stories using varied sources: scientists, policymakers, NGOs, business, consumers, involved people, the general public (Wyss, 2008).

The environment is one of the important decisive factors exerting influence on development's possibilities. The major environmental problems such as deforestation, water pollution, air pollution, loss of fertile soil, solid waste disposal etc. are related to human activities and development. Significantly, there is an inseparable relationship between environment and development.

1.2 Research Problem

Environmental problems and issues are gradually increasing around the world. Therefore, people should have a clear understanding of how these environmental issues and problems are arisen and what action has to be taken. There is a growing demand from the public for more and more information on environmental issues and great link between awareness or knowledge and action. Thus, socially responsible media in their reportage can make issues be seen as important at a given time in a given society by placing emphasis on such issues. This could be through frequency of reports, the prominence given to the reports and analysis of the issues at stake. Thus, this research study explores the print media reportage on environmental issues on newspapers in Sri Lanka, due to its significant impact on human's socio- economic life. Specifically,, the existing literature advances that environmental issues and problems are of the lack of attention in newspaper reportage. Considering these, the researcher will be sought to find the answers to the problem 'Do Sri Lankan newspapers cover sufficient environmental issues?'

1.3 Objectives

1. To explore the extent of coverage given to environmental issues in The Sunday Times, Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu newspaper
2. To identify the reported environmental issues in The Sunday Times, Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu newspaper
3. To find out the level of prominence given to environmental issues reported in Sunday Times, Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu newspaper. (The level of prominence given to environmental issues is determined here through five criteria; Nature of the story, Item, Placement (page), Space and Trends.)

2. Methodology

In order to carry out the objectives of the research, qualitative and quantitative methodology were employed. Hence, primary data were collected through content analysis, Three Sri Lankan newspapers in three languages selected performing purposive sample selection method. Selection of these three newspapers was based primarily on their highest circulation. The total number of newspapers was one hundred and fifty six (156), fifty two (52) newspapers from each three newspapers which published on Sundays in 2014. Since the year 2014 was a significant time to observe environmental agendas brought in forefront by the news media in general and newspapers in particular, the newspapers published in 2014 collected for the sample. Unit of analysis, the smallest element of a content analysis was the individual article on environmental issues.

Primarily, data gathered through content analysis analysed and subsequently, comparison and contraction performed. Themes and patterns identified and environmental news and issues counted to see frequencies. Frequency counting was used to find the prominence of reporting on environmental issues in newspapers. The space of the news articles measured to see how much space allocated. The nature of the story, the length, the placement, space and trends of the articles analysed to understand and draw conclusions about how important the media source felt the covered topic was or should be regarded by its' reader.

The constant comparative method used to develop concepts from the data by coding and analysing at the same time. The constant comparative method "combines systematic data collection, coding and analysis with theoretical sampling in order to generate theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing" (Conrad, Haworth, Neumann & Scott, 1993). Finally, the findings presented in tables and graphs and deepened analysis with statistics (percentages).

3. Literature Review

The research studies on the environment in differently are well documented in existing literature, but, current scientific literature rarely examines the news coverage on environmental issues elsewhere in developing countries and in Sri Lankan newspapers in particular. Therefore, this research explored the news coverage of three newspapers in three languages; Sinhalese, Tamil and English. This study sought to fill this gap and contributed to extensive knowledge in the area.

In 2011, Jalarajan Raj and Sreekumar found that developing countries consider poverty and problems of underdevelopment as of greater concern than environmental issues. In Asian and third world countries, the concept of environmental journalism is still found new comparing to developed countries. They depend on the environment while developed countries' basic needs are met. Developing countries are facing an abundance of environmental degradation compared to others. According to them, commercial interests and monopolization of media ownership resulted in the escalation of commercial imperatives in media production, which directly paved to a shifting representation of environmental issues.

Several findings have criticized the quality of the environmental news coverage. In 2012, Roba found that media has not assigned a permanent section and not given proper emphasis for environmental issues. As he mentioned, most of environmental issues were too brief and covered giving priority to other issues such as sports, investment, agriculture, health and education. He investigated that low level of coverage in editorial policy and newsroom showed the low level knowledge of editors and journalists. Nitz and West (2004) pointed out that media coverage of the environment..... is poisoned by inconsistencies, distortions and a misrepresentation of data. Liebler and Bendix (1996) identified that environmental news

coverage is typically devoid of scientific explanations and pro-environmental “mobilizing information” and has been “crisis- or event-oriented”. Overall, there are studies portraying the media’s inaccurate, misconstrued representation of environmental issues in the world, but not essentially in Sri Lanka.

Hoerisch (2002) mentioned that although the coverage on environmental issues has increased over the last few years, the media’s supply of information on the environment is still quite low and one-sided: the variety of environmental topics tackled should increase, the reporting should not only highlight the environmental issues that are at the top of the political agenda, but the coverage should be a more continual one.

Bacon, Das and Zaman (2009) concluded that environmental reporting in Bangladesh is a strong and growing sub-field of journalism which constructs its own veracity in ways that reflect the social, economic and political contexts. In 2010, Reza has drawn a similar conclusion on environmental reporting in Bangladesh. She found that newspapers gave a special attention to global climate change issues, impacts and debates, which were particularly relevant to Bangladesh. It is clearly evident that they set specific agendas on combating changes, conferences and seminars, impact of changes, issues of compensation and local and regional environmental issues. Both Bengali and English dailies attempted to link the regional environmental issues with the global climate change. In addition to that, as Reza says, news reports and commentaries helped readers identify key stakeholders who in various capacities and at different stages influence the setting process. It was implied that print media in Bangladesh is powerful enough to interpret environmental issues and influence policies, which among other issues set national agenda to raise voices and lobby for international climate change funds for Bangladesh. According to the researcher, this proactive nature of Bangladesh newspapers on environmental issues is indicative of the shifting role of news media from developmentalist approach to advocacy-oriented advocacy journalism.

Sampei and Usui (2009) found a dramatic increase in the newspaper coverage of global warming and public concern relatively. Thus, these researchers pointed out the necessity of effective communication maintaining mass media coverage. The results showed that an increase in media coverage of global warming had an immediate influence on public awareness of global warming issues.

Okoro and Nnaji (2012) carried out a study and concluded that environmental pollution in the region by the press received low coverage. Further, they revealed that environmental issues are largely confined to the inside pages of the newspapers. They believed that environmental education will add impetus to the struggle for having a healthy environment, as well as sustainable environment.

Agwu and Amu (2013) have drawn their attention in different way compared to above mentioned research studies. The theoretical approach was the framing theory. They found that great proportion (125 out of 332) of the news articles used negative tone in headlines. The majority of articles on climatic change framed in terms of “blame” and “action”.

Aiyesimoju & Awoniyi’s (2012) suggested that press should give adequate attention to various issues on agriculture, as well as its developmental programs in its reportage and to intensify efforts on setting environmental agenda so as to facilitate sustainable development in agriculture and environment. In the year 2007, Norma and Hasan found that environmental news is underrepresented in Malaysia and New Zealand and that the news patterns in the two countries are quite similar. These researchers questioned the quality of the news, with much of the coverage being conflict-framed, one-source event stories, with high dependency on government officials. Through interviews, it is revealed some differences between New Zealand

and Malaysia in journalists' awareness of organizational determinants of news, editorial policies towards the environment, sources criticisms of journalists' laziness, but also many common problems, including journalists' lack of knowledge about environmental issues and science. In Malaysia, government control of the news and editors' self-censorship of sensitive news is identified as a problem. Finally, the study concluded that newspapers in both countries do not operate as information providers or educators, but most of the time they are reactive towards environmental issues.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 The extent of Environmental News Coverage

From the findings of the study, it became evident that Sri Lankan newspapers do cover environmental issues in a certain way. As indicated in Figure 4.0, the total number of articles of specific newspaper on the environmental issues varies considerably.

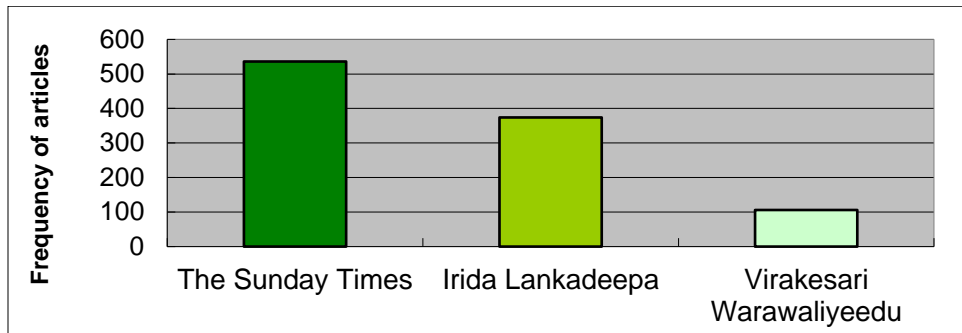


Figure 4.0: The total number of environmental articles printed by three Sri Lankan newspapers in 2014

The total number of environmental related news stories is taken as an indicator of how much attention is given to environmental issues by particular newspaper. The Sunday Times newspaper devoted the highest environmental articles (536 articles) by contract to other two newspapers; Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu. Irida Lankadeepa devoted three hundred and seventy four articles (374) for the environment, while it was only one hundred and six (106) in Virakesari Warawaliyeedu newspaper. Significantly, ten (10) Virakesari Warawaliyeedu newspapers had no any environmental issues covered.

4.2 Types of environmental issues covered by newspapers

Below, figure 4.1 has shown a significant difference in numbers of categories of environmental issues printed by selected three newspapers and reporting trends throughout the whole year of study.

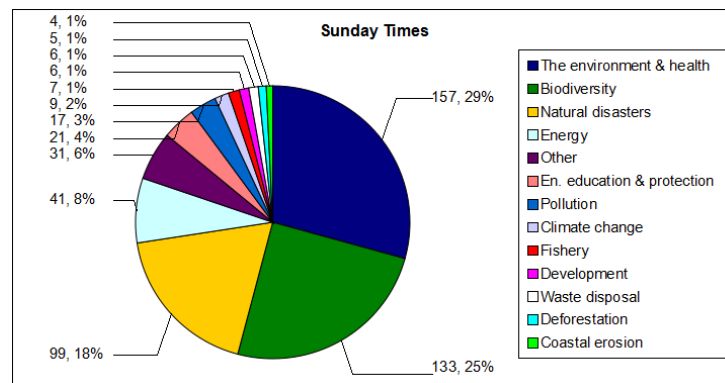


Figure 4.2: Number of articles which covered environmental issues in The Sunday Times in 2014.

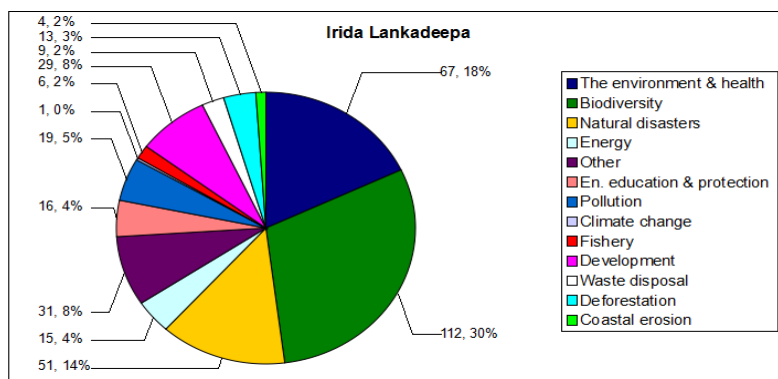


Figure 4.2: Number of articles which covered environmental issues in Irida Lankadeepa in 2014

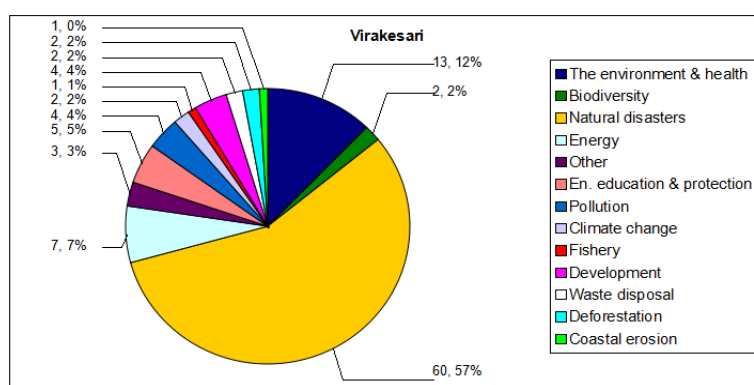


Figure 4.3: Number of articles which covered environmental issues in Virakesari Warawaliyeedu in 2014

4.3 Level of prominence

4.3.1 Nature of the story

It is found that most of stories have just reported without any in-depth analysis. The Sunday Times just reported 87% from its total coverage. Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu also had 91% and 89% articles, respectively without any in-depth analysis on the environment.

Table 4.2: Nature of the story reported in three newspapers in 2014

Newspaper	Just Reporting	Solutions	Follow-ups	Law & Policy	Total
The Sunday Times	465 (87%)	41 (8%)	6 (1%)	24 (4%)	536 (100%)
Irida Lankadeepa	340 (91%)	10 (3%)	16 (4%)	8 (2%)	374 (100%)
Virakesari Warawaliyeedu	94 (89%)	0 (0%)	12 (11%)	0 (0%)	106 (100%)

Source - Content Analysis (2015)

4.3.2 The items published related to environment issues

From the above findings of the study, it is evident that most stories in three newspapers published feature articles, giving low importance to the story. From these three newspapers, The Sunday Times had 51 % of features and 46% of news reports in contrast to other two. It is

evident that The Sunday Times has given an importance to environmental issues than other two newspapers. The Sunday Times has published six editorials.

Table 4.3: The items published in three Sri Lankan newspapers in 2014

Newspaper	News reports	Features	Editorials	Letter to the editor	Total
The Sunday Times	248 (46%)	269 (50%)	7 (1%)	13 (2%)	536 (100%)
Irida Lankadeepa	119 (32%)	246 (66%)	2 (1%)	7 (1%)	374 (100%)
Virakesari Warawaliyeedu	15 (14%)	89 (84%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	106 (100%)

4.3.3 Placement of articles

The study is shown that most of the environmental stories in the Sri Lankan newspapers covered by the three newspapers studied were placed on their left pages.

Table 4.4: Placement of articles on environmental issues in on the pages of three Sri Lankan newspapers in 2014

Newspaper	Front page	Left page	Right page	Total
The Sunday Times	47 (9%)	373 (70%)	116 (21%)	536 (100%)
Irida Lankadeepa	11 (3%)	209 (56%)	154 (41%)	374 (100%)
Virakesari Warawaliyeedu	13 (12%)	55 (52%)	38 (36%)	106 (100%)

4.3.4 Topics appearing on the front page

There are only seven topics printed on the front page in The Sunday Times, while it was only six topics in Irida Lankadeepa. All the environmental related articles on front page of Virakesari Warawaliyeedu captured only 'Natural Disaster' issue. Those topics of stories are summarized as below:

Table 4.5: Topics reported on the front page in three newspapers in 2014

Newspaper	Energy	Health	Nat. disas	Bio .	Fish ery	Defo resta ti	De v	Wast e Dis	Ot her	Tot al
The Sunday Times	14	13	10	5	1	1	-	-	3	47
Irida Lankadeepa	3	2	3	-	1	-	1	1	-	11
Virakesari Warawaliyeedu	-	-	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	13

4.3.6 Length of environmental articles

The figure mentioned below demonstrates that all three newspapers have a different pattern of the length of articles.

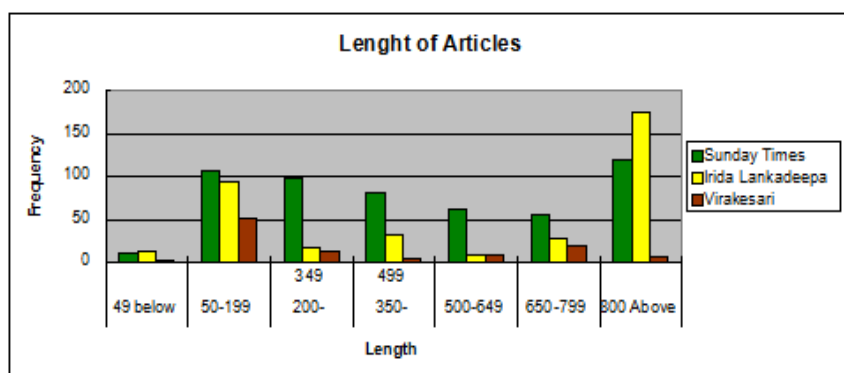


Figure 4.4: Length of environmental articles in three newspapers in 2014

4.1.4.5. Trend analysis of news coverage

According to the figure mentioned below, it is indicated that The Sunday Times newspaper has reported the highest number of articles in March and August. In Irida Lankadeepa, it could be seen in September and August. Virakesari Warawaliyeedu has reported more articles in November. There was a sudden increase in Virakesari Warawaliyeedu in late 2014.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the Sri Lankan newspapers do cover environmental issues, though the subject matter did not receive much coverage. It is concluded that The Sunday Times newspaper published the highest environmental articles giving more importance by contrast to other two newspapers. In Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu, environmental issues were not only ignored, but also (if covered) they were given very small portions of the newspaper and marginalized in relation to their presentation. Therefore, it shows a significant difference in numbers of printed articles by three newspapers in year, 2014. It is concluded that the most emphasized environmental issues of three newspapers are absolutely different. It seemed that some important environmental issues like waste disposal, deforestation, coastal erosion, climatic change and development related issues need to be more exposed and covered in order to educate the public.

In terms of the extent of coverage, types of environmental issues, level of prominence (nature of the story, item, placement, space and trends), The Sunday Times newspaper has given the significant representation or considerable coverage for environmental related issues than other two newspapers. But it is found that most of stories have just reported without any in-depth analysis in these all three newspapers. It revealed that the level of importance given to environmental issues were low in the newspapers.

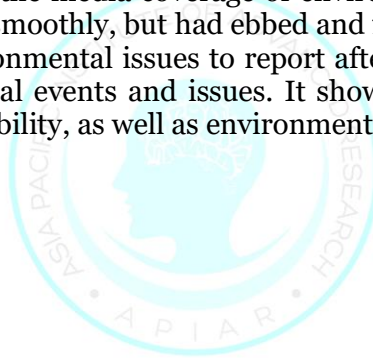
The Sunday Times has published considerable number of editorials remarkably which is one of positive characteristics of a newspaper. Comparing with the above two newspapers, Virakesari Warawaliyeedu has been given the lowest coverage to environmental issues, publishing more feature articles and less news reports. The low level of coverage in editorial and newsroom has shown the low level knowledge of editors and journalists. Therefore, it is evident that the coverage of environmental issues in the form of editorials was exiguous and insignificant in Irida Lankadeepa and Virakesari Warawaliyeedu.

Furthermore, the study revealed that environmental issues are largely confined to the inside pages of the newspapers. These most of those inside pages were left pages. According to the observation done, it is shown that right pages allocated for advertisements, dictating the focal points of the inside pages of a newspaper. These findings indicated the poor placement of stories as a result of media ownership, commercial purposes, etc. it shows that the environment is not a prominent topic of discussion for three newspapers.

In terms of front page coverage, it is found that environmental news of three newspapers are not considered as prominent and less coverage is allocated on the first page. It is shown that these newspapers do not consider all issues as important in a similar weight. This could be explained as the weakness and lack of knowledge of personal and influences of media ownership etc.

Furthermore, it is obvious that all three newspapers have relatively small environment coverage. Thus, the small length of coverage suggests more straightforward environment news presented by the newspapers. Irida Lankadeepa has devoted more space (An entire page) for the environment than The Sunday Times. But they allocated such space to cover the esthetics of the environment. The Sunday Times had quite similar pattern of length at all length and more articles above 800cm². It is shown that The Sunday Times has allocated more space for the important environmental issues especially for the environment and public health. Therefore, it is evident that The Sunday Times has a quite well understanding of the matter.

In terms of trends in the year, the media coverage of environmental problems in all the three newspapers was not increasing smoothly, but had ebbed and flowed in 2014. Most of these three newspapers have covered environmental issues to report aftermath of the incidents. They have ignored important environmental events and issues. It shows that these newspapers have not understood their social responsibility, as well as environmental journalism itself.



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