

# Impact of Media on Social Behavior During Crisis: A Case Study of Cauvery Water Dispute News Coverage in Kannada News Channels

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## Abstract

*The power of media is enormous. Being prime public opinion cultivator the distinctive role the television news channels play during crisis must be analyzed and interpreted for future positivist approach to news coverage. The present study analyses the news coverage during Cauvery water crisis in Karnataka. The study has investigated the impact of Kannada television news channels during Cauvery crisis along with its perceived role and responsibilities. It is a quantitative study using content analysis, interview, and questionnaires to collect the primary data. The study provides introspective view to the news channels and regulatory authorities. The study finds that viewers were affected by the coverage. It points out that media can be provocative with their content selection and selective exposure.*

**Keywords:** *Crisis news coverage, News channels, ethics, social behavior, content regulation*

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## INTRODUCTION

Media is a powerful public opinion generator. Naom Chomsky the social scientist accused media in its role as ‘manufacture of consent’. Regional language Kannada news channels in India played distinctive role during Cauvery water crisis between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states. All the news channels gave live broadcasting of riots, protests and other political developments during the crisis. This coverage was widely discussed in the public sphere for its merits and demerits. News channels have been blamed by politicians, government, and public for repeated telecast of violence. The central Information and broadcast ministry issued an advisory to all Kannada news channels not to broadcast any development that triggers violence.

Several research studies on media have proved that television is very powerful as it has visual advantage. While watching television, viewer tries to relate the circumstances of the programme with his /her life. As Panda, T, (2013) puts it ‘Mass media remains a powerful tool for mobilizing large segments of the population. The impact of audio-visual media as a very powerful vehicle for communicating idea and images is known to be tremendous’. Being fourth pillar of democracy it watches the functioning of other three pillars and acts as a bridge among them. Informing the citizens about the developments in the society and helping them to make informed choices, media makes democracy to function in its true spirit. There is also the necessity to create platforms for diverse media and credible voices for democracy to thrive (Parceiro, 1999). The evidential presentation of the issues with video has made television more effective in creating public opinion.

### **Background**

The crisis between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states related to water sharing dispute is century old. It has turned into violent protest several times in the past. The people from Cauvery basin kept on fighting for more share of water from Cauvery and other tributary rivers. In recent past, it had taken into a form of movement and attracted political and social interest. As Supreme Court judgement went against Karnataka, it caused a few more attacks on Kannadigas in Tamil Nadu. Further, the protest took a violent turn in September 2016. Several organizations, and political parties involved in protests, brought pressure on the government to act. Government was compelled to protect the interests of the State and therefore refused to implement apex court judgement, for the first time in the history of Cauvery dispute. Media became one of the prime agents of information distribution in the crisis. All Kannada news channels carried 24x7 coverage on Cauvery crisis generating public debates, protests and violence. The way media reported the crisis was widely criticized by intellectuals, politicians, and governments. The state government appealed for the stoppage of such coverage in media and central government issued advisory for the first time to Kannada news channels to stop live coverage of the conflict in public interest.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

TV is considered more significant than all the other types of media. This can be due to the ease of access for a wide range of social groups. Media can act as a tool for encouraging or

preventing people from certain actions. Although news coverage of disasters and similar incidents can have positive results for aiding the victims, one must not forget the possibility of creating anxiety and panic among the populace. Therefore, all media must endeavor to cover the incidents in a way that does not cause anxiety or panic (Ghassabi & Zare-Farashbandi, 2015).

The credibility of Kannada television was seriously at stake. In their quest for eyeballs and TRPs, the local channels were feeding viewers with a diet of gossip, crime, sleaze, stings and lowbrow humour (Rao & Ravi, 2015). Media channel credibility refers to the audiences' perceptions of a news channel's believability, as distinct from the believability of the individual journalists and sources, media organizations, or the content of the news itself (Bucy, 2003). Garnett (2007) argued that instead of focusing on its effect on the people, media divert attention to materialistic endeavors. He said that, "crisis become opportunities to showcase the capabilities of advanced, virtual communications hardware and software."

Spigel (2004) studied the strategies of the post 9/11 media industry and concluded that television was the medium hit hardest by the conflict between maintaining the image of serving the public's interest and the need to cater to the public taste. Implementing nonstop, commercial-free coverage would have cost the television industry gigantic sums of money. It would have also arguably taken a toll on its viewers. It can therefore be theorized that crises inflict both positive and negative results on consumers and networks.

Regardless of the potential impact of a national crisis, only one or two persons decide the content a network broadcasts. This is because executive producers and news directors are trained to take decisions in compromising situations: it is what they are hired to do. There is one goal for news organizations: relay the latest information. The methods of how to do so remain considerably open for interpretation, so long as they remain within the network's code of ethics. Safety is always in the public's interest. Since news stations have the ability to mobilize, or immobilize people during a crisis, they must provide consistent updates. In such situations, media is the only witness to the event and is therefore a viewer's sole source of safety information and evacuation plans. During a crisis, a network's ethical standards remain the same: accuracy before anything. Production teams want to show audiences a story, not offend them (Dewey B, 2011). News gathering particularly is an expensive operation requiring high levels of investment and consequently media executives are under constant pressure to deliver

demographically desirable audiences for news and current affairs programming to contribute to profits or at least avoid losses (Shankar P, 2015).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The "hypodermic needle theory" implied mass media had a direct, immediate, and powerful effect on its audiences. The theory suggests that mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly. The theory also establishes that the audience is powerless to resist the impact of the message. There is no escape from the effect of the message. The media shape public opinion and persuade the masses toward nearly any point of view desired by the author of that particular text (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Media dependency theory states that the more dependent an individual is on the media for having his or her needs fulfilled, the more important the media will be to that person. As theoreticians mention, "greater the media dependency in connection with a particular message, the greater the likelihood that the message will alter audience cognitions, feelings, and behaviors", (Ball-Rokeach, & DeFleur, 1976).

Cultivation theorists argue that television has long term effects that are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant. Gerbner defines cultivation as the creation and maintenance of stable images about life and society (and driven by everyday means of communication) (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

The Information manipulation theory suggests that we can persuade people by omitting information, telling untruths, going off the subject and confusing the other person.

The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. Frames influence the perception of the news of the audience, this form of agenda setting not only tells what to think, but also how to think about (Fairhurst, & Star,1996).

Priming refers to enhancing the effects of the media by offering the audience a prior context – a context that will be used to interpret subsequent communication. By priming audience with particular images or semantics prior to a persuasive message, a communicator can actually, heighten the likelihood that thoughts with much the same meaning as the stimulus will come to mind (Domke, Shah & Wackman, 1998).

### **Scope of the study**

The present study would contribute to the deeper understanding of media's impact during sensitive social situation. Further, it would guide the media professionals in preparing program content and format during the crisis period. It would also benefit the social scientists and media educators to track the development of media roles and responsibilities. This study would provide introspective views to the news channels and regulatory authorities. Such study is deemed important to guide the media content selection and presentation.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- The present study investigates the role, responsibility and the impact of Television news during crisis considering Cauvery water dispute and related events news coverage in Kannada news channels.
- The study specifically analyses the content of television news channels during 3 days of crisis and related ethical bindings, the opinions of politicians, journalists and general public related to news coverage.
- It analyses the views and interpretations of representatives from news channels about content selection and its perceived impact.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Based on the research problem the survey method and content analysis were selected to collect data. The research tools such as questionnaire and Interview were used to gather primary data. The primary data is gathered through non probability sampling method from the viewers of television programmes during Cauvery crisis as it is difficult to map the viewers of particular news channels. A sample of 100 completed questionnaires filled by respondents who viewed the television during the crisis was considered for analysis. Sample respondents are spread across rural and urban areas in and around Bangalore, as the city was majorly affected area in the state. Sample was drawn from different respondents consisting of general viewers, politicians, and professional journalists who were involved in news coverage. Politicians and journalists were interviewed for data collection. The data was also gathered through the content analysis of television news that was broadcast for three days when the state was engulfed with Cauvery water crisis. Content of four Kannada news channels were selected based on TRP of those 3 days

in September 2016. The content of TV9, Public TV, *Suvarna* News and BTV Kannada TV channels were analyzed.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Content analysis

On September 12, a *Bandh (shutdown of public services)* call given by Cauvery water agitators took a violent turn. Kannada news channels repeatedly telecast the video in which Tamilians punished a Kannadiga. Channels showed live the people who took law into their hands and projected anti social elements as Kannada heroes who safeguarded Karnataka's interest. They presented Kannada activists who were involved in protest as fighters and Tamilians as perpetrators. The boy named Santhosh had made video teasing Kannada film actors and uploaded it on facebook. He was later beaten up by Kannada activists. Media showed that video with provocative headlines in TV channels of TV9, *Suvarna* and BTV. Later on, all these channels shared that video through their facebook pages.

Several news channels contributed in inciting communal passions by broadcasting gruesome incidents repeatedly. They used Kannada and Tamil equivalents for words like 'beaten to pulp', 'mauled', 'hammered' and 'thrashed' to describe violence. Anchors of Kannada channels alleged that Kannadigas were not being given medical treatment in any hospitals of Tamil Nadu, condemning the 'arrogance' of Tamil people.

All the channels broadcast live coverage with their OB vans and backpacks. Live coverage aggravated violence and the presence of camera increased stone pelting by the mob. That day TV9 Youtube viewers number increased from 2000 to 20000. Public TV got more than 10000 live streaming viewers. Channels started showing the live images of burning vehicles with Tamil Nadu registration numbers. Violence spread like wild fire in the state provoked largely by the heavy coverage of protests on TV channels.

Interestingly, the news channels took up the role of police by appealing for peace and assured protection to citizens during crisis. Ironically, they did not stop telecast of violence but continued with disclaimer before every commercial break.

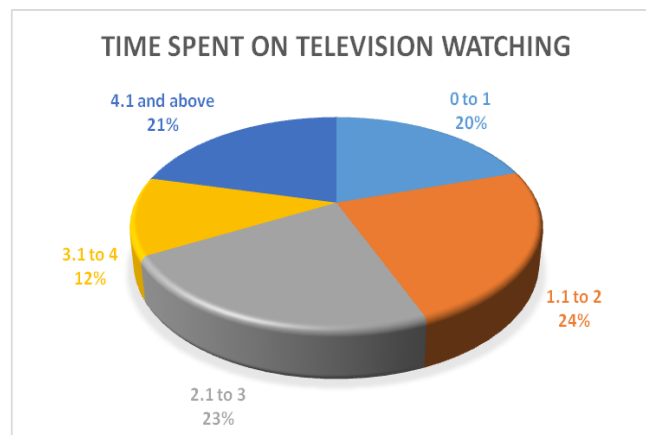
Meanwhile, government and politicians from different parties realized that the news channels have provoked the violence and therefore called upon media through their official

press releases as to not to highlight the crisis. The then Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Venkaiah Naidu issued the advisory to all Kannada news channels. This is not the first time that social responsibility of media was questioned. Even during 26 /11 Mumbai terrorist attack, the same questions were raised and debated. Showcause notice was issued to media houses and law was amended barring live telecast of army operations during terror attacks.

### Analysis of Opinion of Public about News Coverage of Cauvery Crisis

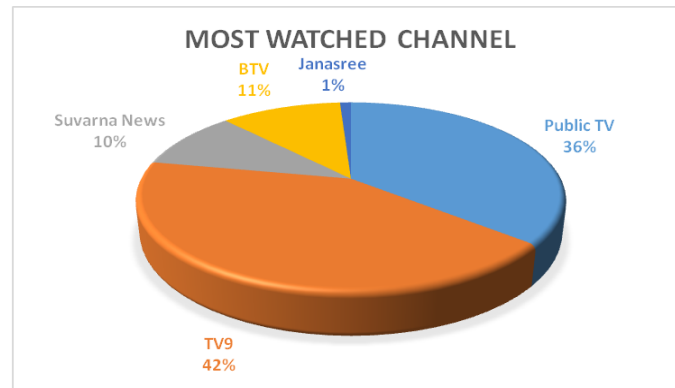
Majority of the respondents (55) watched television for news on Cauvery dispute whereas 20 people used both television and newspaper, 14 used Internet and only 3 used radio.

Fig.1: Respondents Television Viewing Time in A Day



During Cauvery crisis, majority (24%) of respondents watched television between 1 to 2 hours, 23% viewed for 2 to 3 hrs and 21% were in front of television for more than 4 hours. That indicates that majority of the respondents depended on television for the update on Cauvery water dispute.

Fig. 2: Most watched news channel during crisis



About 42% of the respondents watched TV9 for the updates during the Cauvery crisis. Next most watched channel is Public TV (36%), BTV (11%), Suvarna (10%), and Janashree (1%) respectively.

Respondents recalled certain headlines related to crisis of news channels they watched. The survey revealed that respondents shared the information they received from the media and discussed about them. All the respondents said they discussed the issue with friends, relatives, family members, colleagues, and students.

About 92% of the respondents said they developed some sort of pride towards their motherland and river after watching Cauvery crisis on television. Only 8% said they were not affected by the news channels' information. Just they took it as information.

After receiving information about Cauvery crisis, 86% respondents changed their perception about Tamil Nadu. They felt Tamil Nadu is showing its stubbornness and arrogance regarding the issue. After watching the video on television about *Kannadigas* getting beaten up in Tamil Nadu, some respondents said they got angry with *Tamilians*. However, 14% said their views on neighboring state is not at all influenced.

Majority (73%) of the respondents felt news channels have stirred the violence during Cauvery crisis and 86% of them said even news channels mobilized people to fight for Cauvery in violent ways and reflecting violence stimulators as heroes. However, 28% replied news channels are not stimuli in the crisis and 14% said news channels did not instigate people to protest. Majority (82%) of the people said, as news channels continuously telecast the information about Cauvery issue it affected the government decisions like all party meeting, cabinet meeting, going against Supreme Court order, special assembly etc. 18% of them assumed



that there was no impact of news channels on government decision and government took decisions within administrative framework.

About 62% of the respondents said information given by the news channels is appropriate. On the other hand, 38% said it was not at all relevant and created hype. All the respondents unanimously said that during the dispute news channels should give information with more social responsibility and reports should be credible, balanced, and should not provoke people to take wrong decisions. As in television, we can see the demonstration of incidents live, news providers must take proper decisions before telecasting them. Some of the respondents opined that media should be a guiding force during the crisis period to maintain peace in the society without causing panic in the society.

### **Analysis of Opinion of Journalists about News Coverage of Cauvery Crisis**

Journalists were of prime focus during Cauvery crisis. Their provocative emotional appeals lead to spread of violence like wild fire. However when asked, most of the journalists agreed that such coverage would harm the social health. The way news was framed on the Television created fear among viewers.

Opinion of journalists who covered and witnessed Cauvery conflict in Karnataka is given below:

- “the news channels completely misdirected the Cauvery movement. It had also spoiled the social health. Most of the reporters, anchors, and media owners have kept aside their obligation towards society and shown socially harmful intentions with their violent video. In their mad race to increase TRP ratings, TV channels sensationalized the crisis violating core journalistic ethics and values. Media performed like politicians airing opinioned news reports.”
- “Regional news channels in both the states fueled Cauvery violence with hysterical reporting. Today’s channels are running after TRP. An advertising executive is controlling and dictating the content of the channels. The unhealthy competition among channels is leading to a slow death of media’s social responsibility. Media worked similarly in 1991, when there was massive exodus from Bangalore to Tamil Nadu by *Tamilians*. In the past the mainstream newspapers played similar role like what today’s news channels did.”

- “Cauvery dispute is a very sensitive issue as two languages are involved. Reporters should have been aware of its impact on two states and its people. The hatred would continue though the dispute resolves. Media should behave responsibly without getting carried away by emotional or commercial interest.”
- “Reporters working in news channels are not qualified. They are emotionally involved in the news rather than being objective about it. They do not know the ethical and legal responsibilities of media. As there is requirement of specific qualification for every profession, media being most important entity in the society needs to expect certain educational qualification while appointing journalists”.
- “We were directed to show whatever is happening on the streets. It is our responsibility to show the truth to the society. People cannot blame news channels as TRPs show that they watch our channels regularly. The channels which showed the Cauvery dispute have received highest TRPs those days.”
- “We have telecast the news like we do on all other days. Please understand, Cauvery water sharing is an emotional issue that has been around since ages. We cannot be held responsible for this.”

### **Analysis of Opinion of Politicians about News Coverage of Cauvery Crisis**

All the politician respondents felt that media had irresponsibly handled the Cauvery dispute and triggered violence. Due to media’s exaggerated coverage, the law and order was at stake. Politicians suggested proper education and training for the reporters. The journalists of yesteryears commanded a lot of respect from all parts of the society, but the young journalists today are immature, and need to be trained to handle such crisis felt most of the politicians. The opinion of politicians is given below:

- One of the ministers said, “Media is playing up /telecasting violence to incite more public. TV channels celebrated Cauvery issue. Some reporters went as far as to provide justification for the violence.”
- One elected representative, an MLA said, “Even when *Mahadayi* (water sharing issue between Goa and Karnataka) protests broke out a few weeks ago, channels didn’t go to the ground level with an objective of understanding the issue. As a result of this, both states have a constant feeling of injustice being meted out to them.”

- An MLC said, “Media is sensationalizing every issue without understanding the ground reality. They blamed politician’s unwillingness to resolve the issues. They were continuously questioning politicians’ responsibility instead of demonstrating their commitment towards social welfare. Entire episode was provocative.”

### **Ethical Bindings**

According to New Broadcasters’ Association (NBA), “Television news has a greater reach, and more immediate impact than other forms of media, and this makes it all the more necessary that channels exercise restraint to ensure that any report or visuals broadcast do not induce, glorify, incite, or positively depict violence and its perpetrators, regardless of ideology or context. Specific care must be taken not to broadcast visuals that can be prejudicial or inflammatory. Equally, in the reporting of violence (whether collective or individual) the act of violence must not be glamorized, because it may have a misleading or desensitizing impact on viewers. News channels will ensure that such reconstructions will not cross boundaries of good taste and sensibility. This includes taking adequate precaution while showing any visual instance of pain, fear or suffering, and visuals or details of methods of suicide and self harm of any kind and will not cross boundaries of good taste and decency.”

According to Broadcasting Content Complaints Council (BCCC), “Broadcast content shall not induce, incite, encourage, justify, reinforce or glorify violence or terror or its perpetrators or contain anything against the maintenance of law and order or promote anti-national attitudes, present violence as glamorous or an acceptable solution to human conflict, incite violence against specific groups identified by race, national or ethnic origin, color, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or mental or physical disabilities”.

Central Information and Broadcasting Ministry issued an advisory to all news channels and local cable networks stating that, “certain TV channels have been telecasting provocative, inflammatory news programmes, airing footage of violent incidents, rioting etc.. repeatedly. These could further ignite tensions and reaction and could cause the law and order situation in the city of Bangalore to deteriorate. Whereas it is felt that news, views or comments relating to Cauvery water dispute should be telecast only after proper verification of facts and present with due caution and restraint in a manner which is in the public interest for maintaining the harmony.” Advisory warned the channels, “not to carry the news which incites violence,

coverage of violence incidents and rioting, telecast of live or file shots of violence and care in choice of words while reporting. Failing which will lead to prosecution of the offenders as per provisions of Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act – 1995 section 19 in public interest.”

## CONCLUSION

Coverage of inter-state water dispute issue posed several problems and dilemmas to the media. The study has found that the media reported Cauvery issue in a provocative manner. The content analysis revealed that the words used in news channels were emotionally bound and exaggerated. The headlines were depicting the view of sufferer and victim. The words used were reflecting the violence justification. Even before the Supreme Court verdict on this dispute, media primed the minds of agitators and later framed it in the provocative manner.

A majority of the respondents used television news channels for primary information regarding Cauvery dispute. On these days, they viewed news more than a regular day's viewing hours. TV9, Public TV and BTV were the popularly viewed news channels. The content analysis also correlates with this reaction of audience. These channels have done 24hr non-stop coverage of the developments. Most of the respondents remembered headlines, as those were associated with their emotions. Respondents have discussed the issue with friends and relatives. About 92% of the respondents said they felt a sense of pride about their state, land, and water after watching Cauvery crisis on television. After receiving information about Cauvery crisis, 86% respondents changed their perception about Tamil Nadu into negative. They felt Tamil Nadu is showing its stubbornness regarding the issue.

Majority (73%) of the respondents felt news channels have stimulated the violence during Cauvery crisis and 86% of them said even news channels mobilized the people to fight for Cauvery in a violent way by reflecting violence stimulators as heroes. Majority (82%) of the people said as news channels continuously telecast the information about Cauvery issue it affected government decisions. All the respondents unanimously said during the dispute news channels should give information with more social responsibility and reports should be credible, balanced, and not provoke people to take wrong decisions.

Journalists felt that reporters and anchors in these days are emotionally involving with crisis issues. They are lead by commercial and emotional interests. However, some of the

journalists who have reported expressed that they have done their duty without bias. Another key factor in determining a news channel's treatment of crisis communication relies on the media personnel employed at the company. Politicians criticized lack of social responsibility by the media. Both journalists and politicians felt that proper educational qualification is essential to become responsible journalists.

There is ethical binding related to crisis communication. The Press Council of India, BCCC and NBA have evolved guidelines for reporting. However, the practice is not monitored and scrutinized. There was an opinion that there should be a statutory body to implement and create awareness about ethics. The central government advisory subsequently controlled the Cauvery dispute coverage. Media toned down the coverage. Every time when there is crisis, media's role is questioned and criticized. The study proved that television is a powerful tool of public opinion and it can set the agenda and make it happen. Television messages can last long in the minds of viewers and it alters the perception of viewers, points out the study.

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