

S. D. R. Tennakoon

Rural Water and Sanitation Section, National water supply and Drainage Board

BACKGROUND

This paper basically attempts to examine the influence of the print media on the water crisis in Sri Lanka by reviewing the literature. Water is essential for life on earth. Many ancient civilizations have developed on the banks of the Nile, Indus, Tigris, Euphrates and the Ganges. Social, cultural and economic developments are based on water. Though we see that water is abundant, usable water is limited. There is therefore a serious conservation problem in many places in the world. In the near future, demand for fresh water will be higher than oil. It has already become a scarce commodity as water resources diminish on a rapid scale.

However, news media are highly selective in the representation of risk and the impact on the environment. These representations are shaped by socio-political and cultural values. Environmental news is a heavily contested arena filled with challenges. The press normally amplify some voices and mute others. Moreover, the news media have a preference for the dramatic image and the newsworthy sound bite. This has led to the use of visually strong media strategies by environmental news sources. There is therefore, sensationalization and oversimplification of complex environmental issues. This distorts some messages and lets others come through loud and clear affecting the nature of the opposition.

Foucault's discourse of power, and social construction theory by Peter Berger were used to study the influence of media on the water crisis in Sri Lanka.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to assess the influence of the media on the water crisis based on print media in Sri Lanka. This study critically analyzes the relationship between the role of environmental journalism and its social responsibilities in relation to the water crisis in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The present study explores hidden and new perspectives of environment journalism in Sri Lanka. It is mainly based on qualitative methodology. For this purpose, content analysis of newspaper articles and review of relevant literature were carried out. All environmental news coverage which were relevant to water issues, published in selected weekend newspapers, Sunday Observer, and Lankadeepa which are from two different operators, picked randomly between 2009 to 2013 constituted the universe for the study. In view of the constraints of time and manpower, 100 articles were selected proportionately. The sample was stratified according to two media of newspapers; namely 60% Sinhala and 40% English.

Though several interesting themes emerged from the data, it is important to note the limitations of this study and potential for future research in this area. Since the time span of the study and selected sample are limited, the conclusions cannot be generalized. The study may provide several themes, which can be followed up with further qualitative and quantitative research. Larger studies of this nature are necessary. However, the problem of selecting proper newspapers and the right articles was found to be

the major limitation of the study.

Findings

The data analyzed show that many nations and local communities today are engaged in serious conflicts regarding water. However the way the media portray the water issues is a bit questionable as some media organizations have not maintained a neutral stance in their news coverage.

The data show the media presenting a consistent picture of the social world which may lead the audience to adopt the reality of 'fact' and of normal values and expectations. The media have the ability to create images of social reality by which the public may structure their views of the world. The media produce definitions of situations and sociably constructed realities (Schoenfeld et al., 1979)

The recent Rathupaswala and Thunnana incidents which brought out the voice of the grassroots people against environmental destruction by capitalism shows how the media have been manipulated by various powers. The water crisis faced by residents of Rathupaswala due to the discharge of industrial waste became a powerful mode of social mobilization. However it is evident that when constructing news on the water crisis, the media do not play an active role in interpretation and in constructing social reality for audience.

Moreover, due to the continually increasing population in the third world, fresh water has become a scarce resource. Pollution of ground water has become the major risk in industrial countries. Literature shows that water is the basis of all life on earth. Water pollution is an insidious threat because (as some experts said) it is often discovered only when it is too late: impurities may filter down into the groundwater very slowly, without giving any advance warning. This also means it is difficult to find the culprits in time (Wilenius, 1996).

Pollution from industrial production in general has become a major threat to the continued existence of life on earth. Many also referred to the dramatic increase in chemicals and synthetic materials in the world's bio-geochemical system. Civil activists in particular, but also certain industrialists, stressed that we still do not know the exact effects of most chemical substances, and that we therefore might have unpredictable time-bombs ticking away in the environment (Wilenius, 1996).

Hanwella and Weliveriya residents hit the street as a result of contamination of water which was released by a rubber products factory. The Government was intimidated and fabricated a story that the protests were orchestrated by "vested interests". According to the three government ministers the protests were conspiracies to sabotage the economy of the country. According to the media nearly 1500 armed security personnel had been deployed to disperse the protesters using water cannon and teargas. As a result many were injured and hospitalized and some of them were arrested. The data reveal that the state media whitewashed the attacks. Private media were intimidated by the government. State owned newspaper Daily News only carried the relocation of the factory in a small space hardly highlighting the story and highlighting the unworthy facts. So did the Sunday Observer.

CONCLUSION

Water is essential for life on earth. The construction of environmental news is a heavily challenging arena due to the consistent competition with political stories. The press normally elaborate some voices and hides others on the basis of personal agendas. Relatively little research has been devoted to assess the role of media in the water crisis in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the conceptual and methodological lessons learned from the study will usefully support future, more detailed studies to improve our understanding on the influence of media on water crisis in Sri Lanka.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Eric, D. (Ed.). (1999). *Discourse of the Environment*. UK: Blackwell.
- Hannigan, J. (2006). *Environmental Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Hansen, A. (1991). The Media and the Social Construction of the Environment. *Media, Culture and Society*, 13 (4), 443- 458.
- Hansen, A. (1990). Socio-Political values underlying Media. *Coverage of the Environment Media Development*, 37 (2), 3-5.
- Kunzet, M., & Witlox, N. (1993). *Communication Research Trends. Communication and the Environment*, 13 (1).
- Nelkin, D. (1987). *Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology*. New York: Freeman and Company.
- Saxena, H.M. (2010). *Environmental Management* (2nd ed.). India: Rawat.
- Schoenfeld, A.C., Meier, R.F., & Griffin R.J. (1979). Constructing a Social Problem: The Press and the Environment. *Social problems*, 27(1), 38-61.
- Toth, F.L. (1996). Communicating Global Environmental risks: Acid rain in the Hungarian Press. *Society and Economy in Central and Eastern Europe*, 18 (3), 36-55.
- Wilenius, M. (1996). *Sociology and the Environment. The menace of global environmental change*, 39(1), 5-30.

