

Media coverage of water security issues in the water-stressed Northern Province of Sri Lanka: An explorative study of three Tamil dailies before and during the pandemic

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Abstract

Media's role in influencing and reflecting public opinion, providing environmental awareness, and stimulating public participation is on the increase as environmental information becomes widely acknowledged and protection and conservation of natural resources is given priority in society. Public opinion on water conservation and water supply management leads to potential changes in policies and socio-economic behaviours by the public. Print media and particularly newspapers are quite a powerful tool still for disseminating information in society.

This study investigated the extent and scope of newspaper coverage on the subject of water security within the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Three newspapers, namely, *Thinakkural*, *Uthayan* and *Valampuri* were chosen based on their popularity according to readership, circulation as print material and for being daily local or regional papers in Tamil. 2019 and 2020 were chosen as the two years covering pre-pandemic and pandemic years respectively for this study based on the premise that water usage and related news coverage would be different in the 2 years. Printed pages of daily issues of the three papers were systematically read and the pieces with any reference of water, irrespective of context were cut out for scanning and classification. The 1,214 items gathered as described above were subjected to quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Substantial decline in coverage of water related issues (28%) was noted from 2019 to 2020, which could be linked to the prevailing pandemic situation in 2020. It is noteworthy that a substantial amount of column space (80%) in the papers was allocated to reporting general news items such as events in the community related to new water projects, rain events as well as floods and drought events and reporting of allocation of irrigation water. Only 20% of space was given to non-news articles including

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advertisements related to water. These small numbers of non-news articles were subjected to further analysis after following categorization into five consistent themes. These were water resources, water governance or water management, water quality, water quantity, and water and society. The trend appears to be that water resources and water management issues were reported more often in *Valampuri* and *Uthayan* than *Thinakkural*. *Thinakkural* touched mainly on water quality issues over the same time period.

Minimal coverage of water related issues by newspapers could subvert the interest of stakeholders and the public in addressing water related issues. This could be the reason why local people are unaware of local water issues when vernacular newspapers fail to report on local issues. This study has revealed the critical role local print media can play in awareness raising at community level about the unsustainable practice in water usage while promoting local initiatives for conservation of water resources.

Keywords: *Media coverage, Water security, Newspapers, Northern Province, Sri Lanka.*