
Indian News Media and Natural Calamities: Case of Chennai Floods

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ABSTRACT

Dark clouds of climate change hovered over South India in the months of November and December of 2015. Chennai, one of the most important metropolitan cities of India was at the center-point of the floods that brought the city to standstill for days. At this difficult stage, Chennai needed a voice to reach out to the central government and people of the country for help. Media being the most powerful and influential tool of mass communication was the best choice. But it took over a week for the national media organizations to realize their role in this difficult situation.

This paper seeks to analyze the media coverage of the entire calamity where national media was accused of ignoring such a relevant event during the initial days of the floods. But social media rose to the occasion and played an important role in relief and rescue operations in case of Chennai floods. While modes of communication like telecommunication was drowning in affected areas, emergency community radio shook hands with the social media in helping victims.

In order to analyze media's role and coverage of the event, the research adopts textual analysis tool to study one week of media coverage.

Key words: *Chennai floods, Social media, National media, Selective coverage, community radio.*

INTRODUCTION

The most important thing when a difficult situation occurs like a riot or an earthquake or during floods is “information”. The most powerful and the fastest way to convey information to various agencies and concerned people is the media. In situations like these, it is not money or goods, it is information about where safety lies and where help can come from.

Over 1.8 million affected, nearly 300 people died and losses in excess of 20,000 crore due to floods in Chennai. This is not a mere number for some media gain but suggests the impact of the floods in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Newslandry.com describes the situation of the floods in Chennai in one of its articles with the lead as, “The Rains have abated and the state of Tamil Nadu has got a reprieve of 24 hours before another spell of heavy rains. Chief Minister Jaya lalithaa has announced an allocation of Rs. 500 crore towards relief and rehabilitation. But there is no clarity on the actual toll the floods have taken on the state. This continued lack of information can be blamed to the lack of attention from the national media outlets on the Chennai floods.” In this article Govindraj Ethiraj, editor-in-chief, BOOM discusses media's coverage of the disaster

with popular media experts like, Lakshmi Immanuel, DhanyaRajendran and SiddharthVardarajan.

Talking about media's role in capturing and communicating information to people and important organizations, Siddharth Vardarajan points out the limited focus of Indian National media poses. He also says that, social media has been the outlet and people have shown their feelings and provided help using the new medium. But at the same time, he points out the miss-management and miss-governance of the state government and how it was not being criticised in limited media attention. Another angle that Dhanya Rajendran brings out is kinds of wrong information which was being spread on instant messaging services as local TVs did not have to expertise to handle the situation and criticize the state government.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethics and the fifth estate

Holding straight hands a few sociologists have been raising eyebrows over the role of so-called 'new media – cyberspace'. Hidri (2012) defends the importance of cyberspace in the media sphere where he says that, "cyberspace has the potential to promote different types of intellectual, cultural, ideological and economic issues". He believes that for a healthy media sphere it is important to keep media in check. 'Media monitoring', a term given to keep cyberspace in check involves monitoring of news websites, social media and blogs – all of which represent the core of the new media. Though monitoring of media is important for its own growth as users believe in those Internet platforms which are self and user monitored, it does not happen in an organized and precise way. First, because of its public capacity, any user of the web can use it, not for the purpose of monitoring, but rather to conduct communications that have become part of their ordinary daily activities whether it is productive or interactive.

The article by Hidri, gives an explanation of, why cyber media is important and how can be used as strong tool for communicating information. He throws an emphasis on the ability of new media to influence the work of traditional media and its effect on society to an extent that it may be described as the fifth estate. Social websites have had a historical influence in the recent history of the political and social world. In recent past, effective communication performed by the social websites mobilized people and raised Arab revolutions, which changed the rules of the game of revealing and shrouding played by the classic mass media. The US presidential elections is also an example worth mentioning where the digital mobilizing represented the instruments that gave the winning edge to Barak Obama in the election process, and changed the traditions of the democratic game in the United States in particular.

The article defends the use of new media and often calls it the fifth estate. The argument is based on the Habermas theory, where a condition is set for the process of modernization, which is 'communicative ethics'. The 'Universal pragmatics' called by Habermas is what the communicative ethics rely on, where there is an equal exchange and confrontation of evidence with evidence, and the ability to justify, to authority, any allegation, in order to create a communicative context that provides opportunities for understanding. While setting a

base on a theory the argument fails to point out the ethical issues of the cyber media and ways to corrective measures (Hidri 2012).

Media Frames and disaster

There is limited existing research about the framing of visual images, visual content analysis and multimedia coverage of natural disasters. Hallahan (2000) uses a framing metaphor to interpret the frame as a “window or portrait frame drawn around information that delimits the subject matter and, thus, focuses attention on key elements within”. Framing plays an integral role in the study of communication. For a more productive application to research, Hallahan developed seven models of framing involving situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. The final model, news framing, is relevant to this research, as it is “an approach to understanding news processes and effects”. Tuchman (1977) was the first to recognize the vital role that framing plays in the media’s news gathering and audience members’ news processing, suggesting that “media use frames to construct social reality for audiences and thus give meaning to words and images” (Hallahan, 2000, p. 222). Researchers offer several related, yet separate definitions of framing (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Ghanem, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss & Ghanem, 1991; Tuchman, 1977). Entman (1993) suggests that most framing research develops from inconsistent meanings, which result in a fractured paradigm. But D’Angelo (2002) disagrees, arguing that “knowledge grows when theories anticipate, and even generate, apparent refutation” (p. 872).

While studying mass media researches, Matthes (2009) bring into notice that visuals are very less studied as compared to textual elements. After studying 131 studies published in fifteen international journals he argued that problems in “framing research is lack of operational precision, the descriptive focus of many analyses, and neglect of visuals”. According to him this approach is very problematic as textual content is intrinsically affected by visuals, so role of visual elements is very crucial to framing theory. Borah & Bulla (2006) quoted that concept of framing is firstly developed by Goffman (1974).

Media ethics and Impartiality

According to Briggs and Bruke (2004), “the role of the press and journalists has always been a topic of discussion”, and it has been put forward that “journalists are not to be trusted” and they are “slandorous”. In reaction to this, the organizers of media activities presented impartiality and objectivity. As a basic brick to the argument, Altun (2011) takes a major support of ‘media as impartial and objective’ for it to function. Impartiality and objectivity were introduced as discursive tools to avoid political interference in media activities and to make media activities more commercially valuable. As expressed in Reuters Bulletin dated 1921, being “free from emotions” and “unbiased recorders of events and facts” were highlighted as the basics of the professional tradition Hampton (2008).

Visual Journalist’s dilemma

It was Monday around noon, after hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans. There was word of flooding in the Lower Ninth Ward and Ted Jackson, a veteran photographer for the Times-Picayune, went to check it out. As he crossed a bridge, he spotted women and children

stranded on a porch, pleading for help as water rose around them. Yelling across the deep floodwaters that separated them, Jackson learned they had been clinging to porch railings for hours to keep from drowning. “I was trying to find some way to help them off that porch, and that definitely took priority over taking pictures,” he later recalled. The photographer faced a dilemma as he realized he had no way of getting to them. “I also knew that my editors – and the world – needed to see what was happening here. I knew this would be a tough picture to shoot. I didn’t want to make the situation worse or add to the family’s trauma. I tried to become invisible, moving to the side and diverting their attention away from me. I then quickly raised my camera,” wrote Jackson in a piece for the fall 2007 Nieman Reports. He raced back to the newspaper, dropped off his memory cards, and rushed back to the bridge with an inflatable boat and rope. The porch was empty. Rescuers were on the scene, but none had seen the family. “In my mind I could see the little girl slip beneath the water and the others losing their composure and following her. It felt as if my chest was caving in as I assumed the worst. Could I have done more? Did I do the right thing?” Jackson recalled. The ethical quandary the photographer faced during coverage of Katrina in August 2005 was not unusual for journalists covering a crisis. When do they put down cameras and notebooks and pitch in to help? Months later, a Times-Picayune reporter found the family safe in Houston, Texas. A group of teenagers had rescued them with a fishing boat. “I couldn’t wait to talk to them. I had so many demons to quell,” wrote Jackson in his Nieman piece. On the phone, one of the women asked why he left them that day. He told her he returned with a rope and a boat. “Oh, I didn’t know that,” the woman responded. Then, she asked Jackson for a favor: “Can we get a copy of the picture? We’d like to have one to keep.”

In an article, “Video ethics: A dilemma of value balancing” by Robert M. Steele, he states that on the basis of his participant- observation study conducted at two major market television station, suggest that while most television news photographers he observed expressed strong ethical beliefs and values, they often contradict their personal ethical beliefs. The way they cover certain stories and their revelations on the structure of their ethical indicate that they face a dilemma in balancing values. This article suggests that journalists must deal with the often contradictory values of competitions, careerism, journalistic norms, peer pressure, technology and management expectations.

The author seeks to probe the television journalists beneath the surface and the actions of various individuals. The methodology used by the researcher is open ended interviewing and content analysis of the journalists’ work on ethical reasoning.

The author found many interesting findings, of which a few are very interesting and relevant. He says, “reasons for everyone to be ethical varies,” for some it is religion and for many it is the profession. He also found that many of the photographers discussed the motivation for their ethical beliefs by citing specific values such as justice, fairness and compassion.

He points out a very important point, where he says, “journalists put themselves in the roles of those they cover and the viewing public”. He argues that by transferring the roles an individual is forced to consider values and loyalties from perspectives other than their own as journalists.

He goes on discussing the role of consequences in adhering to the ethical behaviour by journalists. He then points out the reasons why sometimes journalists fail. In the article

written by Robert M Steele, three major reasons appear why journalists fail in personal ethical values. These are:

- Role of competition
- Peer pressure
- Monetary benefits



When a news photographer witnesses a tragedy in the making, is his obligation to intervene or to document it?

That question has cropped up a new argument following the New York Post's publication, on its front page, of a photo taken moments after a man was pushed onto subway tracks, and moments before he was hit and killed by an oncoming train.

The photographer, R. Umar Abbasi, claims he got the shot only incidentally, as he was firing off his camera with the hope that the flash would attract the attention of the train driver. It is the sort of explanation that raises more questions than it answers, among them: Was there something more effective he could have done to help? And if there was, was he under obligation to do it?

The above mentioned article which was published in New York Post, April 12, 2012 questions R. Umar Abbasi's decisions as a photojournalist. The article questions his role of a journalist and puts forward a few questions. It asks the journalist society whether covering an event where a human life is in danger and can be saved is more important than intervening and trying to save the life.

Theories of importance

Agenda setting theory: It counters the limited effects school of thought which talks about Selective exposure, attention and retention. The theory raises few questions which are related to the study.

- Who sets the agenda for media?
- Who sets the agenda for the public?
- Who is the most effected by media agendas?

Methodology, tools and technique

To understand media's coverage of Chennai floods in terms of the reaction time and

Primary data collection sources:

Qualitative analysis of the media content across media:

- Content analysis of the media coverage
- In-depth interviews of reporters and editors

Study area/ Sample

- 5 days coverage by Times of India and The Hindu
- 5 days coverage of CNN IBN and TIMES NOW
- In-depth interviews of 2 journalists
- In-depth interviews of 2 media experts (editors/ resident editor)

Analysis and discussions

National Media- So called?

Despite the signs of an unusual monsoon trickling in gradually, the lack of proper reportage led to irreversible damage in the floods that raked Chennai in November 2015. Media has failed to acknowledge the fact that their primary function is to inform. People of Chennai were caught in the floods unawares. The media is so involved in the reportage of political stories, that the news of a forthcoming disaster seemed of little consequence, until the rains struck catastrophe in the Tamil Nadu capital. The front page of India's leading newspapers was packed with the coverage of Bihar Elections and 'Award waapsi' with little or no coverage on an atypical rain pattern in the south Indian state.

Moreover, such coverage can be attributed to Agenda Setting Theory, and the 'news values' – i) proximity, and ii) Target Audience.

Sapan Kapoor of newsgram.com begins his article on Television new media's coverage of Chennai floods with the lead, "The apathy of India's national media has come to the fore, for until this day none of our so-called 'national news channels' found the disaster in the state worth covering and reporting".

Indian television media's strategy is far from clear in terms of the coverage and focus areas. In case of Kashmir and Assam, which are strategically important to India's foreign policy, it is apparent that the two states even being so important are neglected in terms of coverage in comparison with Delhi. Contrast this with the disastrous, unflagging coverage of Nepal earthquake by the Indian media. The reporters belonging to reputed media houses were

literally beseeched by the locals to leave them alone and go back to India considering their “insensitive” coverage of the crisis. #IndianMediaGoHome was the hash-tag that trended on Twitter for a couple of days.

Another case of media’s disastrous coverage was Kashmir floods, where the reporters invited the charge of being ‘embedded journalists’ by the locals for “trying too hard” to portray Indian Army personnel as heroes instead of focusing on the plight on the people marooned in the flooded parts of the Himalayan state. Even in the coverage of Assam floods in 2015, none of the news channels reported on the tragedy that left hundreds of people dead and lakhs stranded; the sheer scale of the natural disaster deserved more than the lip service. It is as though the North East and southern states of India do not exist for the ‘national’ media based in Delhi and Mumbai. The bigger question is, if our national media both English and Hindi can give gigantic airtime to the earthquake in a neighboring country, then what is their strategy of delaying or missing a few south and East Indian states?

After watching 2 days of coverage of the disaster, there were a few major observations. During the news reports, Microphones were shoved into the faces of families which were only now trying to come to terms with the colossal damage that the rains had done to their lives. Questions like, “What have you lost?” were common one in the reports. Reporters even pressed for specifics as the camera panned to the family’s apparent anguish.

Every channel had its own tragedy: If it wasn’t a household which had lost everything in the face of their daughter’s wedding, it was an orphanage that was stranded with no access to food or water. Some channels took the trouble of creating video montage sequences of the flooding, punctuated with shots of people in grief, set to sad, funereal music, which they played every five minutes. Chennai, they declared, was devastated, and there is nothing but trauma here.

Social media- the way ahead

While people of Chennai were confined to their homes and city bridges collapsed, citizens came together on Social media handles like Twitter and Facebook to coordinate efforts to send or look for help with space, food and rescue relief.

People working with chennairains.org shared a Google spreadsheet listing helpline numbers, aid offers and requests, rescue requests, volunteer details and accommodation details. The volunteers worked all night – people from other cities and countries also pitched in and took turns to stay awake. Soon after this effort, Twitter India shared the link and The Hindu hosted it on their website.

Arun Ganesh, an online blogger put together a map inundating roads in Chennai, along with information on vulnerable and water logged points and flood relief camps . An independent weather blogging community also posted regular updates on the situation of rains in the city.

In another case, where social media came handy in the tragic situation was of a pregnant women asking for help on social media. Shreyasi Ghosh, a twitter user used social media to seek help for a pregnant woman in heavily waterlogged Mudichur near Tambaram. She tweeted, “VERY URGENT. PREGNANT LADY IN LABOUR PAINS. NEED VOLUNTEERS. PLEASE RT.#Chennai Rains Help,” from her twitter handle. This message

saw immediate reactions as offers for help poured in and the woman was taken to hospital and the news of her having delivered a baby boy was also posted on social media soon. A few other popular social media handles that helped were, #I can accommodate for inviting accommodations, #ICU Needs for emergency services required in various parts of the city and #volunteers for chennai offered and requested people to help.

Community Radio- a useful tool from the past

Talking about Community Radio, Dr Ashish Sen, media consultant at World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters says that community radio is a communication medium that can reach up to last mile last post. The recent floods in Tamil Nadu have portrayed the importance of a medium like community radio in times of disaster. Owing to the failed communication systems and lack of information for flood affected victims, India's first community based emergency radio started its service in Puducherry. However, he feels that it has come a little too late and it could have got off the ground a bit sooner. He says community radio was long overdue because in a country like India where there are a lot of regions vulnerable to calamities, such as earthquakes and floods, the role of radio is critical and also, very often, it is the only medium of communication that functions during times of disaster. In fact, he says that countries like Japan and Indonesia have demonstrable credentials in terms of community radio and emergency radio playing a very useful role in this context.

Tracing the history of community radio, Dr Sen says that the movement for community radio in India started quiet some time ago. The grassroots radio were eligible for application since the Government of India guidelines of November 2006. And when the Kosi river in North Bihar burst its bank, community radio advocates fought for community radio and it took 7 years for community radio to finally become a reality since then.

He feels that community radio should not just be used in times of disaster, but if it functions as community radio all throughout, it can also help with disaster preparedness, mitigation and rehabilitation efforts. And without any doubt, he admits that, in context of disaster, community radio is most definitely serving its purpose. However, he feels that community radio in South East Asia has not maximised the potential of community radio. Even though there are a lot of community radio stations in Nepal, how many of these station buildings are built taking cognizance of the vulnerability to disasters in that area, he asks. And he says, even if these stations fail, there is always an option of mobile broadcasting and suitcase radio that can be employed in times of disaster.

Talking about the key challenges that confront community radio in India, he feels that one of the biggest problems is that the Government of India guidelines should reflect the spirit of community radio rather than just the fact of community radio. There is a dire need to broadcast news through community radio. Many radio stations abroad allow news broadcast. And live news is one of the main reasons why people tune into radio. Apart from this, he also says that the licensing process for a community radio should be simplified. At present, the license process is very cumbersome. Also, he feels that the government should revisit its stand on mobile broadcasting. According to him, these are the three significant challenges that community radio faces in India. Talking about sustainability issues, he feels that the government should make community radio an independent communication tier. If its independence is compromised, then it will lose its distinction. Stressing on the need for

independence of community radio, he says, "that is where we need to have something like an independent community radio support funds and the government needs to consider how to put this in place."

When asked if community radio has an edge over other mainstream national media in times of disaster, he cited the example of Chennai floods. He says that the need for emergency radio in Puducherry was because the national media was slow to pick it up. Highlighting the fact that in community radio, it is the content that drives technology, he feels that community should be sensitized about the idea of community radio and they should take charge.

Talking about the way forward, community radio could adapt itself to challenges and opportunities thrown by other internet media and it should look at other mix-media models. Although there is no doubt with regard to the vast desolation and suffering that the rains have caused, it's surprising that no channel, in its initial coverage of the rains, was particularly interested in covering the resilience and uprising of the people of Chennai, and the way social media was used to mobilize help and resources across various areas. While a news anchor like Arnab Goswami striking terror in the hearts of politicians isn't a bad thing for our country, the way both natural catastrophes and manmade attacks are reported on screen has to change. It is imperative that reporters learn to be sensitive when interviewing and talking to victims, and understand that empathy is far more important than TRPs.

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