

The Influence of Media on Social Behaviour During the Cauvery Water Crisis

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Abstract: *The media holds immense power as a key cultivator of public opinion, especially during times of crisis. It is essential to analyse and interpret the distinctive role played by television news channels to promote a more positive and responsible approach to crisis coverage in the future. This study examines the news coverage of the Cauvery water crisis in Karnataka, focusing on the impact of NewsChannel, their perceived roles, and responsibilities. The study reveals that extensive and, at times, sensationalized news coverage influenced public sentiment, amplified tensions, and shaped social discourse. The findings offer an introspective perspective for news channels, highlighting that viewers were significantly influenced by the coverage. It also underscores how media content selection and selective exposure can, at times, be provocative.*

Key Words: *Crisis in news coverage, Regional News channels, Media Influence, Social behaviour.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Media holds immense power in shaping public opinion, a role often scrutinized and critiqued. Social scientist Noam Chomsky accused media of functioning as a “*manufacture of consent*,” highlighting its influence in constructing narratives. During the Cauvery water crisis between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, regional Kannada news channels played a significant role. These channels provided extensive live coverage of riots, protests, and political developments, sparking widespread debate in the public sphere regarding the merits and demerits of such reporting. Politicians, government officials, and the public criticized news channels for repeatedly broadcasting violent imagery, holding them responsible for potentially fuelling tensions. In response, the Central Information and Broadcasting Ministry issued advisories to Kannada news channels, urging them to refrain from airing content that could incite further violence.

Research has consistently demonstrated the power of television as a medium, particularly due to its visual impact. Viewers often relate the televised content to their own experiences, creating an emotional and cognitive connection.

Being the fourth pillar of democracy, the media serves a critical role in monitoring the functioning of the other three pillars and acts as a bridge between them. By informing citizens about societal developments and empowering them to make informed decisions, media enables democracy to function effectively. However, for democracy to thrive, there is a growing need for diverse platforms and credible voices to ensure balanced and responsible reporting (Parceiro, 1999). With its evidential and visual presentation of issues, television has proven particularly effective in shaping public opinion.

2. BACKGROUND

The water-sharing dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the Cauvery River is a century-old conflict that has repeatedly led to violent protests. The people of the Cauvery basin have long fought for a greater share of water from

the Cauvery and its tributaries. In recent years, the dispute escalated into a widespread movement, attracting significant political and social interest.

Tensions intensified when a Supreme Court judgment went against Karnataka, sparking attacks on Kannadigas in Tamil Nadu. The situation further escalated in September 2016 when protests turned violent. Various organizations and political parties joined the demonstrations, applying immense pressure on the Karnataka government to act. For the first time in the history of the Cauvery dispute, the state government refused to implement the Supreme Court's verdict, citing the need to protect the state's interests.

During this crisis, media emerged as a key player in disseminating information. Kannada news channels provided relentless 24x7 coverage of the Cauvery conflict, fuelling public debates, protests, and instances of violence.

The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal (CWDT) issued its Final Award on 5 February 2007, establishing water allocations for the four riparian states (Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the Union Territory of Pondicherry) based on a total yield of 740 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) of water from the Cauvery Basin. This yield estimate was based on a 50% dependability. After reserving 14 TMC for environmental protection and inevitable flows to the sea, approximately 726 TMC was available for allocation among the states.

The allocation considered main factors:

1. **Irrigation requirements:** Calculated using crop water needs and the irrigated areas in each state.
2. **Drinking water:** Estimated by assuming 135 liters per capita per day (lpcd) for 25% of the urban population, and 100 lpcd for the remaining 75%. Bangalore city, specifically, was allotted 150 lpcd for the area within the basin.
3. **Industrial water:** Estimated by assuming a 100% increase in industrial water use from 1990 to 2011.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Television is often regarded as the most significant medium compared to other forms of media, primarily due to its accessibility across diverse social groups. Media serves as a powerful tool, capable of encouraging or dissuading certain actions. While disaster news coverage can yield positive outcomes, such as mobilizing aid for victims, it also holds the potential to create widespread anxiety and panic among the public. Therefore, it is imperative for all media outlets to approach crisis reporting responsibly, ensuring their coverage minimizes panic and anxiety (Ghassabi & Zare Farashbandi, 2015).

(Chandrasekaran Velayutham & I. Arul Aram) analysed the news life cycle of the Cauvery Tribunal's final verdict using two newspapers, *The Hindu* and *Dinathanthi*. The study examined how the issue evolved into a core public concern and identified factors influencing its rise and decline in news coverage. Key findings include:

Comparison of Life Cycles: The news life cycle in *Dinathanthi* was longer than in *The Hindu*. Photographs of protests and regular follow-ups helped the news reach its peak coverage but did not sustain its presence for extended periods.

Factors Influencing Coverage: Political statements and events contributed significantly to the prolongation of the news cycle in both newspapers.

Garnett (2007) highlighted that media often shifts its focus toward materialistic gains rather than addressing its impact on society, arguing that crises become opportunities to showcase advanced communication technologies. Similarly, Spigel (2004), in his study of post-9/11 media strategies, noted that television struggled to balance its role in serving the public interest with the need to cater to audience demands. Continuous, commercial-free crisis coverage was deemed financially unsustainable, posing significant costs for networks and psychological tolls on viewers.

(P.B. Anand) focuses on the Cauvery basin in specific districts of Karnataka (Kodagu, Hassan, Bangalore Urban/Rural, Mandya, Mysore, etc.) and Tamil Nadu (Erode, Salem, Tanjavur, Tiruchy, etc.), excluding some districts in both states that are part of the basin.

Hydrological Importance of the Cauvery:

- In Tamil Nadu, Cauvery contributes about 7,000 Mcum (30%) of the state's total surface water potential of 25,000 Mcum, despite the presence of 16 other major river basins.
- In Karnataka, Cauvery accounts for approximately 12,000 Mcum (37%) of the total surface water potential of 32,000 Mcum (excluding west-flowing rivers).

(Vahini, Rajeshwari) highlights the challenges and dilemmas faced by the media in covering the Cauvery inter-state water dispute. It found that media coverage, particularly on television, was often provocative and emotionally charged, using exaggerated language and framing the issue to justify violence.

Media's Role:

- News channels primed audiences before the Supreme Court verdict and framed the dispute provocatively afterward.
- Headlines were emotionally bound, depicting victims and justifying violent responses.

Audience Response:

- TV9, Public TV, and BTV were the most-watched channels during the crisis, with many viewers extending their daily news consumption.
- 92% of respondents felt pride in their state and land after watching the coverage, while 86% developed negative perceptions of Tamil Nadu, viewing it as stubborn.

Crises, therefore, generate both positive and negative outcomes for media consumers and networks. Despite the weight of such situations, the decision to broadcast specific content ultimately rests with a handful of individuals, such as executive producers and news directors. Their responsibility is to provide up-to-date information while interpreting the methods of delivery within their network's ethical frameworks. As Dewey (2011) states, during crises, media outlets function as critical witnesses and often serve as the public's sole source of safety updates and evacuation plans. Maintaining accuracy remains paramount, ensuring that news conveys the story without offending or misleading audiences.

4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Geographical Scope:

The study focuses on the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, where the Cauvery water crisis occurred. It primarily examines the impact of media, especially NewsChannel, on the people living in the Cauvery basin and the affected regions.

Media Focus:

The study emphasizes the role of regional Kannada news channels as key players in reporting the Cauvery water crisis. It assesses their 24x7 news coverage, content selection, and broadcasting style, including live reporting of protests, violence, and political developments.

Social Behaviour:

The study investigates the influence of televised media on public emotions, perceptions, and behaviours during the crisis. This includes examining how media coverage contributed to public debates, social mobilization, protests, and instances of violence.

Stakeholders:

The scope extends to understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders, including the public, intellectuals, policymakers, journalists, government authorities, and protest organizers.

Policy and Media Ethics:

The study explores the role of regulatory authorities, including the advisories issued by the state and central governments, in controlling media reporting during sensitive situations. It also examines ethical considerations for media while reporting crises.

5. OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the impact of televised news coverage on public behaviour, emotions, and perceptions during the conflict.
- To assess whether media reporting contributed to escalating tensions, protests, or violence.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of government advisories in regulating media coverage during sensitive situations.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research tools such as questionnaire and Interview were used to gather primary data. The primary data is gathered through nonprobability sampling method from the viewers of television programmes during Cauvery crisis as it is difficult to map the viewers of 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. The content of TV9, Public TV, Suvarna News and BTV Kannada TV channels were analysed.

7. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

REGRESSION:

Objective 1: To investigate the impact of televised news coverage on public behaviour, emotions, and perceptions during the conflict.

Null Hypothesis (H₀): Televised news coverage during the conflict does not have a significant impact on public behavior, emotions, and perceptions.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): Televised news coverage during the conflict has a significant impact on public behavior, emotions, and perceptions.

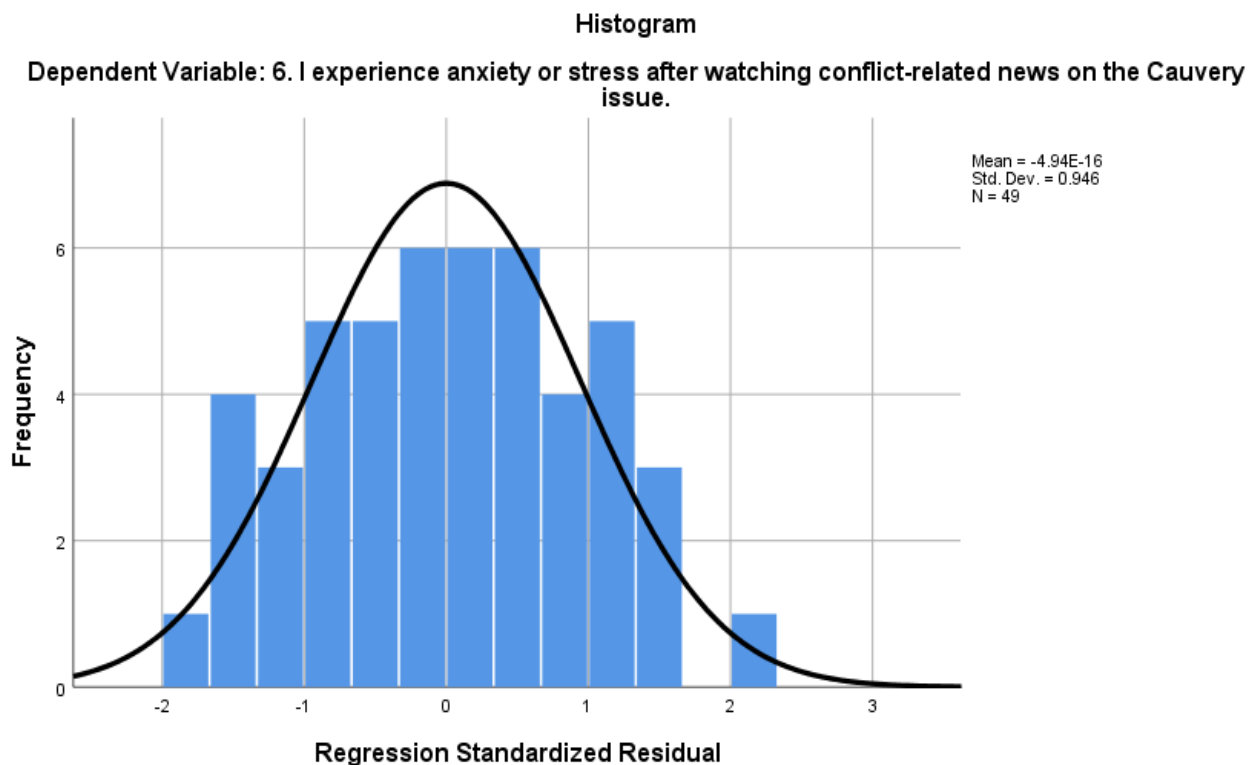
Model Summary ^b									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.585 ^a	.342	.266	1.173	.342	4.472	5	43	.002
a. Predictors: (Constant), 5. Media coverage influences how I discuss the Cauvery issue with others. , 1. I feel that the frequency of media coverage about the Cauvery conflict increases its importance. , 2. The tone of reporting on the Cauvery River issue (e.g., positive/negative) impacts my perception of the conflict. , 4. The detailed coverage of the Cauvery conflict helps me understand the issue better. , 3. Watching televised media on the Cauvery conflict makes me feel more emotionally involved.									
b. Dependent Variable: Experiencing anxiety or stress after watching conflict-related news on the Cauvery issue.									

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	30.776	5	6.155	4.472	.002 ^b
	Residual	59.183	43	1.376		
	Total	89.959	48			
a. Dependent Variable: Experiencing anxiety or stress after watching conflict-related news on the Cauvery issue.						
b. Predictors: (Constant), 5. Media coverage influences how I discuss the Cauvery issue with others. , 1. I feel that the frequency of media coverage about the Cauvery conflict increases its importance. , 2. The tone of reporting on the Cauvery River issue (e.g., positive/negative) impacts my perception of the conflict. , 4. The detailed coverage of the Cauvery conflict helps me understand the issue better. , 3. Watching televised media on the Cauvery conflict makes me feel more emotionally involved.						

Coefficients ^a										
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.826	.902		.916	.365	-.993	2.644		
	The frequency of media coverage about the Cauvery conflict increases its importance.	-.048	.161	-.042	-.299	.766	-.372	.276	.778	1.285
	The tone of reporting on the Cauvery River issue (e.g., positive/negative) impacts the perception of the conflict.	.120	.159	.107	.756	.454	-.200	.440	.759	1.317
	Watching televised media on the Cauvery conflict makes the feel more emotionally involved.	.504	.167	.462	3.008	.004	.166	.841	.650	1.539

The detailed coverage of the Cauvery conflict helps to understand the issue better.	-.157	.220	-.103	-.713	.480	-.602	.287	.732	1.366
Media coverage influences the discussion of the Cauvery issue with others.	.198	.202	.165	.979	.333	-.210	.606	.539	1.854

a. Dependent Variable: Experiencing anxiety or stress after watching conflict-related news on the Cauvery issue.



Interpretation: The regression analysis indicates that aspects of televised media coverage significantly influence the audience's experience of anxiety or stress related to the Cauvery conflict. The moderate R Square suggests that other factors beyond the predictors in the model also contribute to the dependent variable and may warrant further exploration. Hence, we accept alternative hypothesis (H_1).

CHI SQUARE:

Objective 2: To assess whether media reporting contributed to escalating tensions, protests, or violence.

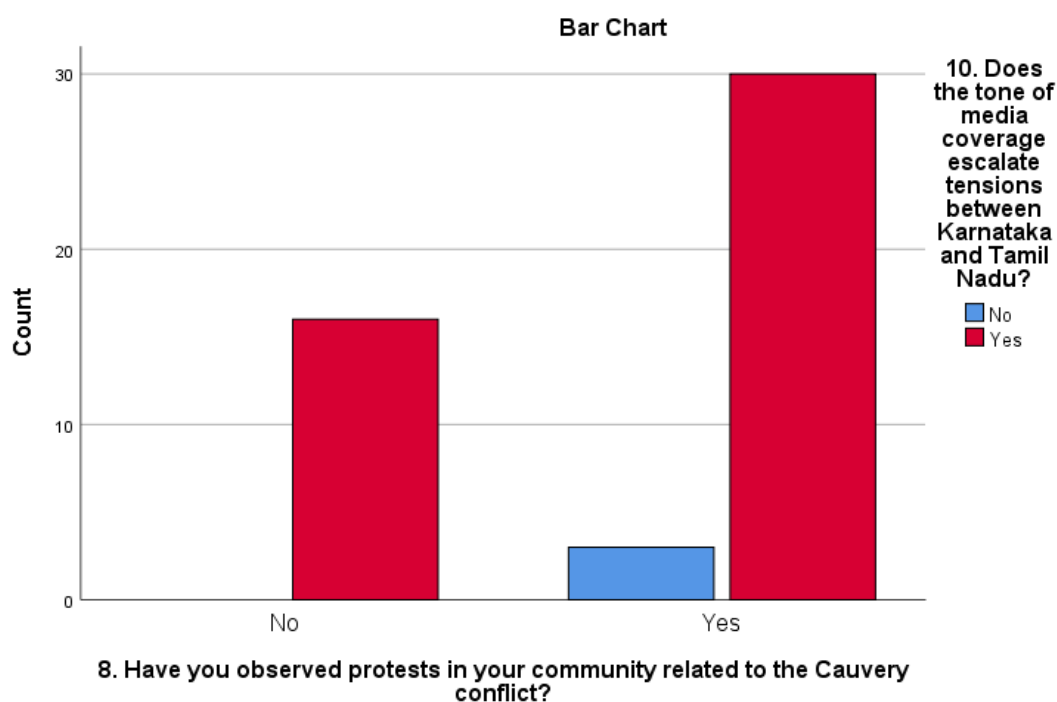
Null Hypothesis (H_0): Media reporting on the Cauvery dispute did not contribute to escalating tensions, protests, or violence.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Media reporting on the Cauvery dispute contributed to escalating tensions, protests, or violence.

Symmetric Measures			
		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-.178	.213
	Cramer's V	.178	.213
N of Valid Cases		49	

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.549 ^a	1	.213		
Continuity Correction ^b	.371	1	.542		
Likelihood Ratio	2.466	1	.116		
Fisher's Exact Test				.541	.296
N of Valid Cases	49				

a. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .98.



Interpretation: Based on the Chi-Square test results, we fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_0). This suggests that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that media reporting contributed to escalating tensions, protests, or violence during the Cauvery dispute. However, the presence of low expected counts might warrant caution in interpreting the results, and alternative tests or a larger sample size could improve reliability.

8. 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. Most 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.

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