

An Analysis of Influenza Reporting in India

C. Velayutham, India

Before becoming an academic I was a journalist with Sun TV, a television channel. I was reporting there for 9 years in the field of government and science. So I think I can talk on both sides: as a journalist and as an academic.

Aims

The topic which I am going to deal with is research on how the English newspapers in India cover epidemics. The funding for this came in 2010. The university asked us to do the research and there are three more researchers like me who have both journalism as well as journalist and academic experience. The objectives were:

- To identify the news 'Frames' in the coverage of the H1N1 influenza in English newspaper articles.
- To examine whether the coverage was predominantly targeted to 'create awareness' or to rise in the 'fear factor' among the public.
- To explore the understanding of the H1N1 coverage among the news consumer.

Methods

We did the research for 3 years from 2010 until 2013, at different increments. I picked up three objectives because there are many.

What are the frames which are being projected by these newspapers? Whether the companies are creating awareness for the people or increase fear or cause panic? And whether the readers (we chose the popular newspaper as well as the very highly circulated newspapers) understood what this influence is.

We used framing analysis at different intervals over the 3 years and we chose the *Hindu*, the most popular newspaper, about 150 years old, which we usually compare to the *Guardian* in the UK, and the *Times of India*, which we say is like the *New York Times* of Indian newspapers. Both are very prominent, popular highly circulated newspapers. They both have a health desk. They have a health editor and they have health journalists working full time for these two newspapers.

Another group worked on the regional newspapers in India because we have a very strong regional newspaper presence in India. These compete with the two English newspapers. Also another small group which looked at only television news stories.

We did a survey with the readers, which started after 2000, and also interviewed state health officials and journalists. I want to share some of the pressing findings which I consider very important to discuss.

The five news frames were:

- Preventive Measures Frame
- Fear Rising Frame
- Government Propaganda Frame
- Public welfare oriented Frame
- Holistic Health Care Frame

These are the frames we worked on as a group of researchers. We have a characteristic for all these frames. We looked at which frame was present in the coverage when the outbreak reached the peak and when it subsided. We wanted to see how these five frames were present.

Findings and discussion

The *Hindu* covered Swine flu, when it broke out in 2010. They covered it on the front page, even though India – with a population of 1.3 billion – has so many issues: social issues, economic issues, political issues. Out of so many issues, this was dominating on the front page of the *Hindu*. In the *Times of India* there wasn't over-coverage on the front page. As a concerned journalist, what the writer has said that we have an entirely burning issue which is going on because we have a lot of child victims; the second point mentioned infant mortality, with other diseases such as tuberculosis, where thousands of people are dying. But the outbreak, which came from the Middle East in 2010 and China, and we hardly had 10-15 deaths. The coverage which you see in the front page of these two newspapers was harmful.

Another significant thing which we saw in terms of framing this was that the fear-rising frame was dominant. In both newspapers which we considered the most popular and prominent newspapers in India. In the *Hindu*, 65% of the framing in terms of headlines and lead, not the full story. The fear-rising frame was predominant in both the newspapers.

These were a few of the headlines which appeared in the outbreak:

- Crowds thronged the Kings Institute to get vaccinated
Headline in TOI, 2012
- Don't risk your life without vaccinating
Headline in TOI, 2012
- Complaints of Shortage of Tamil Flu forces many to migrate to neighboring states
Headline in TOI, 2012
- Flu kills a professor and a slum dweller
Headline in the *Hindu*, 2011
- Beware Children and Senior citizens – you are the easy target
Headline in the *Hindu* , 2012

In the last one, they are just cautioning children, saying to them 'you are the easy target'. Discourse of the text of the second one it doesn't inspire anybody. These are some of the headlines which fell in the framing of fear-rising.

The government started endorsing the vaccine and vaccination, then a very brief report about precautionary measures. Because of this, the tami-flu was administered by the government hospitals and health centres. People got panicked and they started lining up at the private hospitals because we have a very strong private hospital network, particularly for tourism, with all top corporate hospitals. Because of the artificial demand, people started queuing at private hospitals, where they sold tami-flu for 5,000 rupees (double its pre-outbreak price), which is administered free at the government hospital.

There was a repeated difference in prominence with statements from health officials which went to both newspapers during the outbreak. They were covering the statements only in a very small space saying that people need not worry or panic, on the fifth or seventh page. So there is a difference in using prominence for the information. The preventive-measurement frame was almost none in the *Times of India*. The preventive-measurement frame was telling people in coverage what the precautionary measures Indians could take while handling this epidemic.

Later on, we found that the fear-rising frame appeared on only a few occasions in both the newspapers, at the later stage of the epidemic. In terms of the issue-attention cycle, whenever an epidemic spreads, it spreads and it goes to a peak, then it slows so the newspaper picks on another story where this story has faded from the people's view. That is the time these newspapers picked up this fear-rising frame, where people will hardly look at Swine flu because at that time Swine flu was slowly going out of the alarming scene.

In both these newspapers, a view persists about English medicine specialists for diagnosis and treatment. India has a lot of Ayurveda medicine options, which have been proven to be effective. Those specialists and also their treatment options are never covered in English newspapers in India. This is very significant because for many of the diseases when a group of doctors practising homeopathy gave a press release to the media saying they were 'home remedies', there were remedies that you could do at home, you need not go to hospital for a vaccination, this was not covered by these two newspapers. That was another important finding.

While they were promoting the Tami-flu on the very next page almost all major corporate hospitals in Chennai (the declared epi-centre of the outbreak) ran a one-page advertisement saying they had 'sophisticated quarantine wards' for people who were infected by Swine flu which people showing early signs of flu could use. A one-page ad in the same newspaper about the promotion of their particular hospital saying that they had sophisticated quarantine wards for treating people. This is a commercial importance for the newspaper to carry this.

In terms of telling dos and don'ts during the outbreak, one thing these two newspapers kept on repeating was 'use masks, and keep on changing the mask'. Medical advice was that you need not change the mask frequently, but the newspapers said that you would have to frequently change.

Some newspapers even said you would have to change every hour. A lot of pharmaceutical companies were promoting this mask. This led to huge demand and sales of masks in India.

The clarity of this coverage was not up to the mark and when we asked during the survey and also in the focus group 70% said they didn't understand the mode of transmission. Sixty per cent of the readers stopped travelling to the few places where the media told them were the epicentre for H1N1. Many trains were cancelled to Puning. Puning is one big city where they said was an epicentre. Trains and flights were cancelled because the media kept on telling people that this was an epicentre.

We asked about whether they understood a few technical words the newspapers used. Many people failed to understand the word 'quarantine' or 'swab samples' and many other words.

Senior citizens and young people were affected more. We did a survey, and they even said that many families separated the young and the senior citizens at home because of the media advice.

Conclusions

Indian newspapers are growing. The newspaper industry is not declining like in other countries, they are growing. Circulations are increasingly despite of the competition with on-line and television.

People in India are so media dependent. You can use this constructively rather than for the kind of work we saw for H1N1. The third thing is, the very selective nature of the media. Selecting one particular way of diagnosis, of treatment, and not highlighting others. This selective nature of the media is another concern. These are the two newspapers which had a health desk but they consider health news as another item of news and that's it. They didn't work seriously on it. They just considered health news with other news.

For the past 10 years we had cooperative, efficient health sector where they have huge amounts of money. So that could be one of the reasons the behaviour of the media changed. Because they get a lot of money from advertisements. Because of they want to make people come to the private hospitals. This could have an influence. Predominantly our media in India is privately owned and they compete with each other for advertising revenue from these corporations. This will have changed the behaviour of the media in choosing a sensational way of reporting rather than balanced; and although these two newspapers have a history, this is the way they report on health in the recent news.