

Reception of news reports on violence against women by youth in Tamilnadu

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Abstract

News media shapes our opinions and beliefs on issues of social importance. Especially, when it comes to issues relating to violence against women there are several studies on the discourse of the news media. Yet very few studies have opted to see the reception of such news reports by its readers. Studies have observed journalistic frames that has been continuously criticised for its lack of gender sensitiveness and overwhelming sensationalism in reporting cases of violence against women especially sexual violence. This paper tries to explore the reception of news on issues relating to violence against women and if framing of such news has any influence on the news reception.

Keywords: *Violence against women, newspapers, youth, reception of news, audience, India*

1. Introduction

The ideological frames or values a society is exposed to continuously, influences its outlook on certain fundamental social issues either positively or negatively. Based on several information sources along with own experiences and understandings of the social contexts people form opinions on issues of social relevance. Newspapers serve to be one of the major sources of information. The news not only provides us information but also tells us what issues are important by influencing our values and beliefs. One of the crucial social issues we come across through the papers and our own social surroundings is the continuing incidents of violence against women in India. It is quite evident from the National Crime Records Bureau's recent report of 2015 with 327394 crimes against women, in 2014 it was 309,546 and in 2012 it was 244,270. This shows that

the crime rate against women is on an increase constantly and alarmingly.

Being one of the crucial social issues, the news media deliberations on violence against women are to be understood in a larger context. Framing of news, the language, the words of a report matters in shaping the beliefs and opinions of people on issues relating to violence against women since it could strengthen or deconstruct the gender stereotypes. When news reports are merely sensational in nature it could be hazardous to the society. Yet for commercial reasons when news media crosses the line of public interest it is the reader's responsibility to interpret the news in a right perspective. It is essential to understand how effective the readers are in interpreting news reports on violence against women. In both ways it depends on the nature of the report and the value system the present the society has on such issues. Thus, this paper tries to explore how young readers interpret news reports on violence against women in India. It explores what understanding these reports create on the issue. Does it reflect the existing patriarchal values or deconstruct them? In order to answer such questions this study employs focus group discussions that are more qualitative.

2. News representation of violence against women

News of violence against women is significant not only because it influences public perceptions of whether this crime is seen as a serious social problem, but also because it directly influences governmental policy making (Linsky, 1986). Studies examining news coverage of violence against women details persistent problems such as distorted story selection,

gender stereotyping, and inadequate attention to structural causes of gender violence (Benedict, 1992; Carter, 1998; Cuklanz, 1996; Meyers, 1997). A few studies (Lemert, 1989; Schwengels & Lemert, 1986) have examined newspaper rape coverage and concluded that rape stories have fewer details than do stories about murder or assault and do not provide information that puts the crime into perspective. According to a study by Meyers (1994), this portrayal is tied to an ideology that reflects cultural myths and patriarchal assumptions about the proper role and behaviour of women. Representations of the murder and rape of women in newspapers, television news, and prime-time entertainment have been extensively analyzed by feminist scholars (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997, 2004; Cuklanz, 1996, 1999; Moorti, 2002; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Mackenzie & Marcel, 2009). These studies have identified a set of victim-blaming myths and frames that repeatedly manifest across these media (Mary Marcel 2013).

The newspapers in the Indian context have found to report the case of violence against women making them either sensational or like an ordinary case without proper details. Joseph (2004) states “the manners in which such crimes are reported render them so ordinary, mundane and predictable a feature of daily life that they barely enter readers’ consciousness, let alone impinges on their conscience”. Looking further a trend of victim blaming existing where the reports try to find out what role the victim had in the crime to happen. According to Pagelow (1981), there is an interest in looking for the reasons why a woman was beaten or raped, whereas with other crimes, few people ask why a person was robbed. As a result, rape victims may be denigrated and their privacy invaded (as cited in Benedict, 1993). By presenting stories of violence against women as separate isolated events, the news media reinforce the idea that the violence was an isolated pathology or deviance. Maintaining this mirage of individual pathology, the news media deny the social roots of violence against women and absolve the larger society of any obligation to end it (Meyers, 1994; Mary Marcel 2013).

3. Objectives

In this background it is essential to understand how effective our readers are in interpreting news reports on violence against women, especially the younger generation. Since, the recent reports of the Election Commission of India on the country’s youth population has stated that more than 50% population falls below the age of 25 and more than 65% below the age of 35. In fact, as predictions go, the youth population of India is set to reach 464 million by

2021. The youth of a nation are the hope of a promising tomorrow. Thus, this study has concentrated more on the reception of news by the younger generation.

Thus this paper tries to explore how young women and men interpret news reports on violence against women in India. This study explores how the youth’s pre-existing attitudes on gender shape their responses to the news stories on violence against women either positively or negatively. It tries to assess if the news reports contributes to the interpersonal discourse and judgments about violence against women in the minds of young women and men readers and the difference in reception. It tries to find out if it reflects the existing patriarchal values of the society or tries to deconstruct them. In order to answer such questions this study employs a focus group discussion which is more qualitative.

4. Significance of the study

Most of the studies relating news coverage and violence against women have been studying the nature of the news reports, content, and language both quantitatively and qualitatively. Including the studies at the international level very few have dealt with audience reception of news reports on violence against women. So this study explores how far such reports actually contribute to the larger construction or destruction of opinions relating to violence against women in a patriarchal society like India.

5. Research Methodology

The study is part of the larger research on representation of violence against women by the press in India. This part of the study tries to assess the audience reception of supportive and critical messages of the news reports on violence against women. This study adopts the focus group discussion method put forth by Press (1991) and Press and Cole (1992) as pre-post experiments which were more qualitative as in their abortion study in 1999. As per this approach the first level of the discussion consisted of open ended discussion about violence against women prevalent in the society. Following this the selected news reports on violence against women was given to the group to read and record their opinions in writing. The reading of the news reports are seen as a “stimulus” and the post test tool is used to assess their response to the readings. Thus the entire process is the focus group discussion involving pre-post experiments. This method is useful to understand the existing values regarding gender and violence against women among the youth

and the subsequent changes on exposure to different formats of news on violence against women. This process enables us to understand how news reports on violence against women either construct or deconstruct the already held opinions and values among youth on gender and violence against women through the post test. Thus focus groups reflect the fluid nature of opinion formation and can be “catalysts for the individual expression of latent opinion...for free-associating to life” (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 28).

5.1. Selection of participants

For the focus group discussion university students studying post graduate courses aged 20 – 23 years were chosen as purposive samples. Since gender bias is spread as part of the culture of the society a random sample of any group of youth would be a representative sample in the context of the study. The criteria followed was the youth involving both women and men who had the habit of reading newspaper and interested to participate in the study alone were asked to volunteer for the focus group discussion. This study requires understanding the difference of reception of the news on violence against women by women as well as men. So two groups were formed based on gender, one consisting of 12 women students the other consisting of 9 male students based on the availability. This is seen to approximate a discussion size that is considered most effective for this kind of research (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a; Morgan, 1997).

5.2. Selection of newspaper

This study concentrated on the press coverage of violence against women in Tamilnadu, one of the 29 states of India. In Tamilnadu, the leading daily in circulation is ‘Dina Thanthi’ which was started in the year 1942 in south India. This paper is unique in its reach to the rural and urban masses having its strong hold in Tamil language. The recent January 2014 survey of IRS, states that Dainik Jagran (Hindi language paper) tops the list of publications in India with an Average Issue Readership (AIR) of 15,526,000, and the regional language paper in Tamil Dinathanthi (AIR 8,156,000) is in the fifth place. The regional papers are the ones that reach out to the rural and grassroots level people of the society. Regional language papers have higher chances of influencing the public on several issues of social importance. Hence it is essential to understand the nature of discourse of this regional language paper on violence against women in the Tamilnadu context. Among the several other newspapers in

Tamilnadu owing to its reach to the masses this paper was selected for the study as a convenient sample.

5.3. Selection criteria for news reports on violence against women

News media has been observed to have a priority over the selection of the nature of violence against women to be reported. Usually violence’s of ‘abnormal’ range are given more attention when compared to the day to day violence women face. As Kaur R (2013) states it is also important to understand to note why the media chooses a rape story over the other to give a wider coverage. There is a ‘dramatic value’ in portraying crime stories, and this value is increased when the incidence is of rare nature (Saccor V, 1995 as cited in Kaur, 2013).

The news reports on violence against women were selected based on the criteria as follows, a case where the victim is innocent and no victim blaming frame is seen in the report, second the case where the news report blames the victim and her character as a cause for the violence and the third the case where the framing of the case subtly justifies the violence by subjective reporting. It is essential to understand how audiences receive these three reports and interpret meaning. So, following the above criteria for the first category the news report of case one was on the rape and murder of a school going girl child, for the second criteria the news report of case two the murder of a wife by the husband who alleged that her illegal affair had angered him was taken and for the third category news report case three was on the rape of a woman who was a dancer at a bar was taken.

5.4. Description of the cases

In case one, the headline stated “Arrest of the perpetrator involved in brutal rape and murder of a school girl”. The report ran to 3-4 columns of more than 800 words which contained the detailed narration of the entire occurring with the minute identity details of the victim, her family and school along with a clear passport size photograph. The perpetrator was identified with his name, place, past history of crime and a passport photograph. An extra large photograph of the victim’s body lying on the ground with the mourning crowd around was also before the large headlines.

In case two, the news was in two columns with nearly 500 words with a headline, “Wife murdered on suspicion of illegal affair”. The report further contained the details of the family and narrated the

reasons for the murder in detail. It stated that the victim had had an illegal affair for which she was constantly advised by her husband to leave it and live with him happily. On refusing for this, the husband was stated to become angry and kill her by slitting her throat. Photographs of the victim's dead body lying down was large, it included the passport size photograph of the perpetrator too.

In case three, the news was in a single column of 40 words and did not include much of the details except that it had the headline that meant "A beautiful dancer was raped". The body of the report stated the victim's place and stated that she was a dancer at the bar in Mumbai and was lured and taken to an isolate place by a man above 54 years and raped by him and his associates. The woman had lodged a complaint and the case is being enquired.

6. Theoretical Framework:

6.1. Framing and Priming

It is essential to understand media framing in the feminist context. The term "framing" refers to the way news stories are organized by "patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation and exclusion" to suggest particular ways of defining and responding to certain problems (Caragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 216). Framing analysis helps to understand the hidden meanings by exploring the facts that are included or excluded in the process of organising and making of the news reports. In addition, priming theory states that exposure to certain thoughts or stereotypes put forth by media can serve to stimulate related thoughts and stereotypes. In the above context priming is seen to be important since when news reports are biased and stereotypical then it can trigger the pre-existing stereotypical attitudes automatically. Researchers state that this can also happen to non-biased positive representations too. Patricia Devine's work on stereotypes and automaticity in particular shows that priming a stereotype by exposing study participants to words associated with negative stereotypes about Blacks can negatively influence on how subsequent events and information involving Black individuals are interpreted even when race is not initially mentioned (Devine, 1989; Gerbner, et al., 2002). Devine, Dasgupta and others have also shown that when stereotypes are primed via exposure to a member of a stereotyped group or even just via exposure to words associated with that group, stereotypes and related attitudes are activated automatically (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001).

7. Data analysis and interpretations

The focus groups were two based on gender with female and male participants. The deliberations of the two groups on the cases are as follows,

7.1 The first level of the discussion started with a general understanding of several reasons for the existing trends of violence against women in society. Participants stated the following reasons which are prioritized as per the frequency. These are taken as the standards on existing stereotypes on violence against women. Now the study examines if these stereotypes or thoughts are triggered by the news reports serving as a catalyst using the priming theory.

- a. Cultural degradation that has resulted in indecent dressing of women
- b. Role of media in portraying women as sexual objects
- c. Patriarchy
- d. Degradation of values in relationships

7.2. Focus group discussion

The second level of the discussion included reading of the news reports and decoding the messages. The discussions are given case wise as follows,

7.3. Reception of case one:

Out of the 12 women participants 8 and out of 9 male respondents 5 stated that the family was the cause for the crime in the sense it was not advisable for girl children to go out at odd hours. The other reasons cited were family giving space for the victim to go alone were seen as the major causes. The two groups interpreted the first case sympathetic with the victim and identified it as a brutal attack and analysed the facts that the perpetrator had been under alcohol influence and his male patriarchy was the cause for the violence on the girl child. One participant stated that the child going alone to school was one of the major reasons for the crime. Another stated that the perpetrator who had had a previous criminal record being let out was dangerous to the society. His insane mental state of mind was cited as a possible reason by another participant.

7.4. Reception of case two:

Out of the 12 women participants 9 and out of 9 male respondents 8 stated that the victim was the cause for the crime. The victim was blamed for the occurrence highlighting her character. It was stated that the man had no other choice than being angry to kill her after so many warnings and pleadings to come out of her illegal relationship. One of the participant stated that the man was at no fault since

he was ready to give her a chance to live with him even after knowing her character.

7.5. Reception of case three:

Out of the 12 women participants 8 and out of 9 male respondents 7 stated that the victim was the cause for the crime. And the others stated the social norms as the reason for the violence. The victim was blamed for the occurrence highlighting her profession. The members stated that women in such professions, like dancing at bars have none other options than facing such situations. One of the member stated that being a dancer her dress could have been provoking and it could have led to the incident. Another participant in the group stated that being a dancer her unwelcomed dance steps in the bar could have provoked the man to follow her and indulge in the violence.

8. Discussion

In case one, the victim was not blamed and the participants reflected in line with the news framing which sympathised with the victim stating the attack as brutal. But in the cases two and three, the news framing was found to influence majority of the participants who stated that the victims were the cause for the violence. It was observed that in the three cases the news reports were taken trustworthy and not a single participant questioned the framing or credibility of the news report. It shows how much the youth rely and believe the news media and lack critical thinking from a gender perspective. Thus gender of the participants did not make any significant difference in the decoding of the news reports. Thus as a whole both women and men are stereotypical in understanding violence against women issues.

Regarding the publishing of the identity details of the victim and the photographs not a single participant found it to be unethical in terms of the news report instead it served its sensational role in attaching the participants emotionally evoking sympathy and pity. In cases two and three the role of perpetrator was not even put questioned or analysed by a single participant of the two groups. The news reports were taken as authentic accounts, not a single participant questioned its credibility or authenticity. News reports that are biased and stereotypical can trigger or influence the way the reports are received and interpreted by the readers. Thus on reading the news reports the post test tool was used to identify the priming effects.

The reporting is seen to subtly glorify the violence by reporting in line with the perpetrators

version especially in case two which is a dangerous trend. It completely omits the victim point of view and the larger context of the incident. This is the most prevalent framing seen in such crimes and according to Entman: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (1993, p. 52). Thus such frames can prevent the reader to think that there can be multiple frames to an event when explored further. Frames of this sort seem to be highly gender insensitive since media framing can shape how the public perceives and defines an issue (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997).

In case three, the framing of the headline itself is very sensational and biased such that it enables negative judgments about violence against women among women and men readers of the news. Lees (1995) has sought to show how press reporting of rape is often biased, inaccurate and irresponsible.

'She has demonstrated that the press presents a distorted picture of the nature of the allegations, the victims, the offenders and the conduct of rape trials. No law permits to rape women on any criteria, yet subtle justifications were found to be perceived by the readers who had stated that the profession, being out at wrong time were the major causes of the crime. In spite of shifts in public perceptions, media portrayals of rape lack depth and offer news consumers an incomplete picture'.

Rape remains a misunderstood crime "because it is simplified by the media and hence in the minds of the public" (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993, p. 3)

8.1. Findings from the post test questionnaire analysis:

The post test analysis revealed that the four standards of stereotypes reflected by the two groups has been a force behind the following results of the post test questionnaire. The tool consisted of attitude test items on gender and violence against women along with independent variables like gender, education, family income and media habits. The attitude scale consisted of 13 items with Likert scale. On certain individual items like the following there were higher levels of insensitiveness. Questions on the victim being responsible for the violence, a stereotype was observed by many researchers was found to be supported by the two groups. Thus similar results of the study show that there is no significant difference in attitudes relating to gender and violence against women among female and male respondents. Though the overall data shows that the group was moderately gender sensitive, when it comes to the already existing gender biased stereotypes, it was observed that the stereotypes were re-enforced after reading the news reports.

8.2. Cultural degradation has resulted in indecent dressing of women

In the statement which was in agreement with the dress of women being the cause for violence the agreement level was 75% among female respondents and 66% among male respondents. Thus the dress of woman being a cause for violence was pre-existing stereotype and it was reflected or triggered after reading the news reports. All the cases were reflected in line with the news reports and did not delineate in any other direction. This shows that the news reports are considered serious and authentic and the youth do not even question its credibility or authenticity to think otherwise. The context of the violence was not at all analysed in both the groups. The participants did not come into discuss any alternate dimensions relating to the social context, the role of perpetrator or law. This is not a much difference of opinion in this regard among women and men students.

8.3. Degradation of values in relationships

Degradation of values was used as a victim blaming tool by both the groups irrespective of their gender and the value system of the perpetrator did not come into the picture. Victim blaming is seen to subtly justify the violence in the second and third case. Analysing this frame, we could observe that such victim-blaming discourse appears to be a staple of sexual assault news (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Weaver et al., 2000). Coupled with information about the victim, however, this aspect of security-related discourse could be understood to suggest that the victim shared responsibility for the attack by making poor choices, a familiar victim-blaming discourse that often emerges in news accounts of gender violence (Benedict, 1992; Weaver, Carter, 2000 & Worthington 2013)". In the focus group discussion the participants were found to make statements like "the woman is a dancer and she must have performed oddly and provoked by this the man could have followed her and committed the violence". Thus the sensational headlines has proved to give the desired decoding effect.

8.4. Patriarchy

In the case one where the victim is a child victim blaming is not used, instead patriarchy is identified as a cause for the violence. Identification of the victim through the photograph in case one invoked pity and made the participants sympathizes with the victim. This was more emotional and sensational rather than enabling the readers understand the larger context behind the occurrence of the crime. Sensational headlines in all the three

cases questions the objectivity of the news reports from a feminist point of view.

9. Conclusion

The reception patterns of news reports on violence against women among the youth both women and men exhibit their pre-existing values and its influence in decoding news reports on violence against women. The study clearly depicts the underlying gender stereotypes deeply instilled within the participants at their subconscious levels is triggered by gender insensitive reports. The gender of the participants has found to have no significant effect over their understanding of the issues. Thus on one hand it is essential for the youth to understand the norms of gender discrimination deep rooted in the society along with the larger socio economic political and cultural factors contributing to this trend in cases of violence against women and decode the mediated messages with a broader perspective. On the other hand it is the responsibility of the news media to encode such issues with higher degrees of social responsibility and gender sensitivity. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding (1980), research from this perspective allows that cultural readings vary significantly depending on the audience understanding of the world and news reports and when not sensitive it can contribute to dangerous decoding.

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