NEWS PROGRAMMING PRACTICES AND READERS’ CONTENT PREFERENCES: A STUDY OF MALAYALAM NEWSPAPERS

Synopsis

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INTRODUCTION

Newspapers plan, select and present news based on news value judgement and editorial policies so as to provide their readers with news and information that could be of value to them in understanding the society and its various sub-systems.

When editors use a variety of news presentation techniques, the aim is to present news in an orderly and easy to read manner. By using several design elements, editors strive to enhance the noticeability of the content and there by its readership. The resulting design often connotes something beyond the meaning of the words. Such connotations may range from telling the readers which story is significant and serious to those which emphasize light hearted tongue-in-cheek approach.

Such editorial practices are modified from time to time to suit the changing needs and expectations of the readers. No matter how well editors try to provide a news fare to match their readers’ needs and wants, the reader-editor gap continues to exist.

PAST RESEARCH

This reader-editor gap is often a subject of investigation in communication studies. Scores of western media-researchers have investigated this facet from the perspectives of ‘gate keeping’ and ‘agenda setting’ functions of the media. Among them, the agenda setting studies of McCombs and Shaw (1976), Dearing and Rogers (1996), Davis and Robinson (1986) are of significance as they indicate to the presence of differences in prioritizing news at the macro level though not at the micro level. Studies conducted by Bogart (1979), Robinson and Leev (1986) and Hargrove and Stempel (2002) have demonstrated the wide mismatch between editorial judgements and audience interest in news topics. Likewise, in a more recent study, Tai and Chang (2002) pointed out the absence of any correlation between the news coverage and audience interest in reading the reported news.

Such studies however have not been conducted in the context of Indian newspapers and their readers. What has been investigated remains confined to content analysis. This has been the case of studies conducted by media professionals and academics such as T.J.S. George (1967), Ahmed and Subash (1981), Vilanilam (1985) and Ahmed (1986 &1992).
Several students of graduate studies have either examined the content analysis of Malayalam dailies (Joseph 1990, Kumar 1993, Rajesh 1996, Panikkar 1994 and Anil 1997) or investigated the readership of select content (Radhakrishnan and Ranjan 2001, Suresh 1993, Devi 1994, Rajiv 1996 and Nair 2003).

**STUDY OBJECTIVES**

Such being the character of Indian studies conducted elsewhere also, the present scholar decided to investigate the relationship between the news programming practices and readers’ preferences in the context of Malayalam Newspapers with the following objectives;

1. To find out newspapers news programming practices in relation to various categories of news content
2. To find out the readers’ preferences in relation to the various categories of news content
3. To ascertain the relationship between the news programming practices of the selected dailies and readers’ preferences in reading the programmed content.

**STUDY SAMPLE AND METHOD**

To realize the study objectives, the Malayalam press was chosen for this study as it constitutes a significant and dynamic part of the Indian press system. Needless to say, the Malayalam press is dominated by two dailies; the *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi*. Together they command a daily circulation of nearly 2.5 million copies which accounts for more than 70 percent of the circulation of Malayalam dailies. Hence, *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* were selected for the study which was conducted in two phases.

Phase I of the study was concerned with content analysis of the dailies to gauge the news programming practices followed by the sampled dailies in relation to various content categories. The content analysis was conducted in two laps; lap I on August 2nd and lap II on August 18th of 2005.

After ascertaining the news programming practices by the sampled dailies, as manifest in the content analysis, the second phase of the study was undertaken. In
In this phase, a survey was conducted among the readers of the two dailies to determine their preferences in reading various categories of news content.

Readership Sample

The study locale was Kottayam – a district which has a long tradition of being a major seat of Malayalam press. From the district, a quota sample of 150 readers each of the sampled dailies was drawn through a multi-staged sampling procedure. Thus together the total sample size was 300, randomly drawn from the Kottayam town and four other municipalities of the district.

Use of Novel Aided Recall Method

This study used a hybrid method to gather readership data. A structured questionnaire was administered to elicit data on readers’ socio-demographic variables as well as their newspaper reading habits. In addition, the study adopted a novel aided-recall method to ascertain readers’ reading patterns and preferences of news content. The novelty of this method was inherent in the fact that the respondents were supplied with a copy of their previous day’s newspaper, wherein each news item had been chronologically numbered. And, they were instructed to scan the newspaper and mark the news items read by them the previous day. This method was bound to give far more accurate responses as the readers had with them the copy of the daily they had read the previous day. As a result, it was far easier for them to recall with greater certainty the order in which they read the various news items. Using this method, the data pertaining to readers’ preferences in reading various content categories of news was collected in both the laps of the study.

In lap I of the study, each member of the sample was administered a questionnaire on August 3rd to elicit data on their demographic features and news reading habits. To ascertain their preferences in reading news content programmed by the dailies, they were supplied with a copy of the previous day’s newspaper and were asked to mark the items read by them. The respondents of lap I were met again on August 19th to collect data of lap II of the study.
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data so collected was analyzed sequentially to examine the tenets of the three objectives. Here lap I and II data of both the dailies was analyzed independently to examine whether the dailies follow a set pattern in programming news content under the three content categories – geographic, generic and subject matter. The data was coded and classified by two coders independently. As is required, the reliability of the coding decisions of the two coders was assessed using Cohens (1966) method in respect of the three content categories. The inter-coder reliability between the coders was significantly high: 0.885 for the generic category; 0.896 for the geographic category and 0.888 for the subject matter category. To establish the statistical significance of the similarities and differences in the content of the two dailies across lap I and II, the data was subjected to Chi square test of significance.

To ascertain whether the two dailies follow similar editorial programming practices, the lap I and II data was merged to constitute the aggregate data. The aggregate data so obtained in respect of the three content categories of the two sampled dailies was correlated using Pearson correlation test.

Having analyzed the content analysis data as described above to realize the first objective of the study, the researcher proceeded to the second objective of gauging the readership and reading preferences of the news content.

Lastly the analysis focused to examine the third objective of the study concerning the relationship between the news programming practices and readers’ preferences in reading the programmed content. To ascertain the facial relationship between the two factors cited above the data was subjected to the test of proportion. The major findings arising from the analysis are reported here under.

No Set Pattern in the Distribution of News Across Pages

On investigating the various facets of the objectives, it was found that Mathrubhumi devoted more space to news and thereby programmed more news items as compared to Malayala Manorama. However, on analyzing the distribution of news across pages it was found that both the dailies had no set pattern. Some pages had a higher number of stories in both the laps. It was page 2, devoted to local news, which by-and-large had the largest number of stories. The educational pages of both dailies too had a higher quantum of news items.
Prime Focus on Regional News and Straight News

It is well known that most language dailies are regional in their character and content programming practices. The dailies sampled for this study were no exception. The analysis of the geographic categories of news revealed that in both the laps, the largest number of news items programmed belonged to the regional news category followed by local news, national news and international news. Thus the two dailies adopted a set pattern in programming various geographic categories of news. Like wise, the prime concern of both Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi in both the laps was on providing straight news about events and issues of the previous days to their readers.

SIMILARITIES IN EDITORIAL PRACTICES OF THE DAILIES

The two dailies however differed in their practices of programming various subject matter categories of news across two laps. In Malayala Manorama, domestic news followed by education/social service, arts/culture/entertainment occupied the top three positions in lap I. But in lap II, there was a slight difference with education/social service taking the prime place followed by science/IT, domestic politics and art/culture/entertainment. On the whole, such differences were not statistically significant.

The news programming practices of Mathrubhumi in respect of the subject matter categories differed significantly from lap I to lap II. Here along with domestic politics, education/social service and arts /culture /entertainment, the subject matter category of crime/terrorism had obtained a prominent place.

The incidence of providing news stories with pictures was confined to a few stories in both the dailies. The highest usage of pictures was in Malayala Manorama as compared to Mathrubhumi. The Practice of publishing pictures alone as independent news stories was also relatively high in Malayala Manorama.

Reader Satisfaction and Credibility Assessment

Readers’ satisfaction with the programmed news content matters much in making newspapers popular. Also, readers' satisfaction with the programmed content plays the role of an intervening variable in the possible relationship between the news content programmed by the dailies and the content read by the readers. From this
perspective, the study gauged the satisfaction index of the sampled readers of both the dailies in respect of the three content categories. On the whole, the analysis showed that Malayala Manorama readers were far more satisfied with all the four geographic categories of news as compared to Mathrubhumi readers. For unknown reasons, readers of Mathrubhumi were not deriving a high satisfaction from the programmed content.

Likewise, on analyzing the perceived credibility of the sampled dailies, Malayala Manorama achieved a higher credibility score than Mathrubhumi.

READING PREFERENCES OF CONTENT

To realize the second objective of assessing readers’ preferences in reading the content programmed by the sampled dailies, this study examined the readership of the various pages and the quantum of news read by the readers in respect of the three news content categories. The analysis yielded the following results.

Most Read Pages: Page 1 and 3

From among the large number of pages, the readers of both the dailies had their own preferences in reading the pages across two laps. The most read page in Malayala Manorama was the front page. The other pages preferred were page 3, page 4, page 10, and page 17. But in Mathrubhumi, it was not page 1, but page 3, which had the highest readership.

The second highest readership however belonged to page 1 in Mathrubhumi. The other pages which had highest readership in Mathrubhumi were page 10, page 5, and page 2 and page 13.

Low Readership of Content

The study revealed an abysmally low readership of the news programmed by the dailies. While the readers of Malayala Manorama had read only 32.1 percent of the stories published, the readers of Mathrubhumi read less than 26 percent of the stories reported. This finding highlights the fact that readers do not read everything that is printed. Instead, they are very selective and read only a handful of news items. Thus it could be inferred that the reading preferences of readers do not match with the total quantum of news programmed by the dailies.
Similarities in Reading Preferences of Content Categories

Further it was found that the readers of the two dailies do not differ much in reading different categories of news - geographic, generic and subject matter. The readership of content under each of these categories was by-and-large similar as was detected when the data was subjected to Pearson Correlation test.

Convergence in News Programmed and News Read

To realize the third objective, there was a need to examine the probability of similarity noticed between items programmed and items read in the sampled dailies in respect of each news category.

For this purpose the data was subjected to the test of proportion. The results of which pointed out that the news programmed and read in respect of the three geographic categories was similar in Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi. Similarly, the three generic categories of news programmed in them and the proportion of news read in respect of each of the three generic categories by the readers of the two dailies was similar.

The subject matter categories of news programmed and read was also subjected to the test of proportion. Barring two categories of subject matter, in the rest of 12 categories, the proportion of news programmed and the proportion of news read matched in the case of the two dailies.

From such findings two conclusions could be drawn. First, the quantum of news read by the readers of the two dailies is abysmally low compared to news programmed by the editors. The second conclusion could be that of a greater convergence between the news programming practices followed by Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi and reading preferences of their readers.

These broad findings and conclusions are tentative. Further research requires to be undertaken to validate the findings. It is suggested that similar studies be conducted using the same research designs in different locales. In addition, there is a need to conduct studies with an enlarged sample of newspapers as well as readers both in the context of the Malayalam press and in the context of other language dailies including English. Such studies besides enriching research literature would also be of value to editorial managers and planners of Indian newspapers.
REFERENCES


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