

# Role of Media to Create Environmental Awareness

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## Abstract

*Many international organizations recognize environmental degradation as one of the major threat being faced by our planet. In developing countries like India, pollution, unsustainable development, and erosion often lead to the over tiredness of the environment. Recent human development in Western Himalayan region has triggered the unnecessary exploitation of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation. It can be defined as a process through which the natural environment is compromised in some way, reducing biological diversity and the general health of the environment.*

*The perception is that environmental deprivation is partly due to lack of environmental awareness. Thus, for the effective realization of environmental goals, raising the awareness of a society is the only key to trim down further environmental degradation. Media can play a major role in shaping public opinion and government policies. Experts are of the view that a strong environmental awareness can only be created if the media give environmental issues due consideration in their publications. But, in our country, the media does not seem to be in a position to create environmental awareness, because journalists lack basic understanding of the environment and media coverage appears to be event based only.*

*This study is concerned with an assessment of the level of environmental awareness and the role of media in creating awareness. It is also concerned with identification of awareness obstacles on environment issues and need of environmental journalists; so that execution plans to improve the quality of the environment in Western Himalayan region can be successfully implemented.*

*Key terms: Media, environmental awareness, environmental degradation, environmental communication, environmental journalist, environment protection.*

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## Introduction

The environment is fundamental for all living things. If the environment is not protected, the existence of life on earth would eventually be impossible. Environmental change is very likely the biggest challenge that the world has ever faced. The situation is even worse in developing countries like India, where overuse of natural resources for the production

of basic needs such as food, fiber, energy, building materials and transport is leading to ruthless environmental degradation. All people need to have a common understanding of the role played by human beings in reducing environmental deterioration.

Burton (2002) says that over thousands of years, both natural and human activities have shaped and changed the landscape considerably. Environmental knowledge and understanding is essential in helping people to understand the news items from newspapers, radio, television and Internet around the world. The media can play a big role in breaking the silence and making people aware of environmental issues so that they can change their attitude toward it. The environment protection awareness and the sustainable use of finite resources are matters that directly concern each citizen. The majority of the population learn about environmental issues through the global media. According to Tengbers (1995), over 2600 global media channels operate with the support of about 3000 satellites, reaching nearly 1.5 billion people across the globe.

The role of media to sensitize the public about environmental issues is very crucial. But, on the other hand, environmental issues are not yet being treated as media's prime agenda. Media fails to give sufficient attention to such crucial issues and the coverage is only event based. The media does not seem to be in a right position to create appropriate environmental awareness to the.

### **Concept and Definitions**

Over the last 50 years the concept of 'environment' has drastically changed. The environment is commonly defined as the surroundings. Santra (2006) defines the environment as that whole outer physical and

biological system in which man and other organisms live. In its ecological sense, the environment includes the interactions between its biotic and a biotic factor. People are part and parcel of the environment, and they actively interact with its components. The environment is a source of food, air, water and a source of resources like oil and minerals. It is also used to travel and communication and it provides space for shelter and other physical and socioeconomic activities (Otiend 1991). From such definitions, it is clear that without environment, human survival is impossible. The environment and people are ecologically interconnected and it is most important for human survival.

### **Media**

Media is a means of public communication and it is defined by Jensen (2004) as a network to serve as a kind of cultural forum that organized and shapes our understanding of social values. It can influence people's attitude, and it has the power of convincing people and shape up opinions. According to the Oxford dictionary (2000) the media are the main way in which large number of people receives information and entertainment through channels such as television, radio and the newspapers. Random House Unabridged dictionary (2006) defines the media as the communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data or promotional messages are disseminated. Media includes every broadcasting and narrow casting medium such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, billboards, telephone, fax and the Internet.

Media plays a crucial role in connecting the world to an individual and provides opportunity for the individuals to communicate with a wider audience. And, the down side of media communication, as national and

international media ownership is more likely to be influenced by a few, is in its difficulty to maintain neutrality (McQuail, 1994). The creation of environmental awareness through media education, attempted to expand and explore the scope of the environment by making use of processes and knowledge bases associated with environmental ethics and aesthetics (Stables, 1998).

### **Environmental degradation**

Environmental degradation is one of the ten threats officially cautioned by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change of the United Nations. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction defines environmental degradation as "The reduction of the capacity of the environment to meet social and ecological objectives, and needs". Environmental degradation is of many types. When natural habitats are destroyed or natural resources are depleted, the environment is degraded. Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil. It is defined as destruction of ecosystems by some deadly or undesirable change or disturbance to the environment.

There are a number of ways in which environmental degradation can work. Natural resources like water, soil, air and minerals are all resources which are open to depletion through overuse. Unsustainable development and erosion are all forms of environmental damage. Pollution is another cause of environmental degradation. When the environment becomes polluted, it means that toxic substances have rendered it unhealthy. If the damage is extensive, the environment may not be able to reach a state of balance on its own, and the problem could become complicated.

## Background

Geographers argue that environmental issues today have drawn the attention of the common people as environmental degradation and pollution have assumed global dimensions and even threatening the very existence and survival of mankind (Singh 2000). Since the world saw the picture of the earth, photographed from space during 1960's, awareness of the earth as a whole system, fragile and finite, became a paradigm of our era (Dryzek 1997). This consciousness was accompanied by an insight of environmental problems that our planet is facing.

Environmental problems and the consequences of human activities have gained massive political structure. In 1972, United Nation's Conference was held on Human and Environment (UNCHE), in Stockholm, Sweden, where majority of environmental problems was understood as local phenomena. Subsequently, United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) began holding international conferences and organizing activities to gain an effective response from the international community and promote environmental protection programs.

20 years later, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, which hard-pressed for the adoption of the convention to fight environmental problems. The convention assisted in promoting sustainable development and improving the knowledge and understanding of the people regarding environment and development issues. This convention came into force by the end of 2010, and called for governments and public authorities to open up access to environmental information.

Environmental issues have global influences which require action at global level. Most advanced countries attained their prosperity at the cost of the environment and now developing countries are also doing the same. According to Hewitt (1990), discussion about global warming, deforestation, and pollution of the oceans is affecting attitudes related to economic growth and development at local, national, and international levels.

India and many other countries have started to make every effort for sustainable use of environmental resources, but actions are still not well-matched with the extent of the environmental challenges. U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki- Moon made a comment, with regard to environmental awareness at the World Environmental Conference (WEC) at Bali, 2007, in Indonesia. He said that as usual, business cannot be tolerated, for it would be to condemn millions. If we work together, we can create an effective long term response to climate change. Every country must be a part of the solution because every country has a role to play.

Widespread environmental awareness is immediately required to obtain public support for government action in environmental policy and management, which is not possible without the help of the media. The frequently and widely used modern media for environmental awareness are newspaper, radio, television and internet. According to McQuail (1994), there is a set of ideas about media tasks in society, like assisting innovation, instigating progress, providing information about conditions and events in society and the world.

One of the causes of the inappropriate utilization of environmental resources and deep rooted environmental problems in India is lack of awareness. Therefore, raising the awareness of a society is required for the

effective realization of environmental objectives and goals. The lack of environmental awareness has been common even among politicians and policy makers. The patterns of media coverage in India are also uneven. The major media focus only on issues that take place around the big cities. There is an extreme information gap in the rural and urban areas of the country.

### **Historical Perspective**

In comparison to other species, human inhabited the earth relatively recent, but human activities have generated massive amounts of waste which consequently find its way into the ground, water and air every day. Nearly half of the forest that originally covered the earth has been lost. Millions of tons of carbon dioxide and other harmful gases are released into the atmosphere each year, creating the greenhouse effect. Furthermore, current global trends like globalization and liberalization of trade are also having a strong impact on the environment. In this age of turmoil, media can play a significant role in shaping popular views on the environment. If an environmental crisis occurs, the public will immediately look to the media for information. Many commentators attribute enormous power to news media, claiming they have the ability to move and shape governments.

Over the last 40 years, the environment seen as a problem in public and political concern, but still necessary media coverage is not being paid. Environmental reporting has become increasingly marginalized in the news coverage around the world. In 2005, the international task-force on environmental change concluded that a strong consensus has been reached in the scientific community that environmental change is a real and dangerous issue (Lindolf 1995), but still, much more is to do.

The communication media in the world underwent rapid change during the 1990's with liberalization of media policies allowing private sector involvement and the spread of global media networks owned by transnational companies (UNESCO 1993). The broadcast media, have established themselves as the most powerful media or potential source of environmental information in the world today (Dobson 1997). These days, more and more environmental organizations are moving to take advantage of these powerful media to raise public awareness and understanding of environmental issues. However, in some countries, environmental activists and government agencies have not developed fruitful media relations. They just use the media only to generate publicity for events.

Historically, traditional media have often played a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas. Today, in spite of advances in the modern media, many people still relate them more readily and easily to traditional media, which are closer to their local cultures. Environmental communicators have recognized the value of using folklore and traditional media to take environment and development messages to the public. A considerable amount of work has been done since the 1990s, but as many challenges remain, all types of media are needed to be involved in spreading environmental awareness among masses.

### **Need of Environmental communication**

Among all forms of communication, environmental communication is the most debated communication topics in social discussions. The analysis of various environmental problems signifies that it is very important to raise the sensitivity of public toward environmental problems. It is only possible through complex interactive environmental communication programs.



The communication history indicates that in ancient society's word travelled mainly by word of mouth. The prominence of modern media during the beginning of the second half of the 20th century shows significant improvement in essential human communication and interactions (Dobson 1997). In the present days, environmental communication has become as a strong compulsory practice for environmental education.

We can define environmental communication as, "the sharing of information, insights and opinions on environmental issues, trends, conditions and solutions using any means of communication, raising from interpersonal methods to means of mass communication, using the modern as well as traditional media" (Dobson 1997). Morgan (1997) states that environmental communication increases public awareness and knowledge of environmental issues and challenges.

According to Habermas (1994) communication strategy should be planned for people who regularly face different environmental problems but may not hear or understand environmental information. A major issue for many countries in the world is to integrate environment into development policy, and to use communication and education in an integrated way as an instrument of policy (UNESCO 1993). It means environmental educators constantly need to be engaged in environmental communication. However, an important dissimilarity is that while all environmental educators are communicators, not all environmental communicators are necessarily educators.

### **Role of Media on Environmental Awareness**

McQuail (1994) explains that the media provide relevant attention to issues in new coverage by influencing the public awareness of issues and

attribution of significance, which could influence public policy making. Media sources may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its audiences what to think about. People are aware or not aware only due to radio, newspapers, television, and other media prevalent in that particular area. People have a tendency to assign importance to only those issues which media bring to light.

People tend to include or exclude from their cognitions what the media include or exclude from their content. Morgan (1997) proposed that a considerable amount of the public's comprehension of environmental issues is likely to come from the media. According to him, what people hear about issues such as the global climate change, ozone depletion, greenhouse effect, water and air pollution and other environmental threats, is likely to come directly or indirectly from the media.

Media is an important source of information, according to which appropriate decisions can be taken on environmental matters. Indeed, the media is the only source that people use to gather information about environmental issues (McCombs 1995). But there is always a shortage of journalists who specialize in the environment and related subjects.

News media play a significant role in developing the manner in which media users think about environmental issues, but perhaps more importantly, that the news media are not fulfilling this role acceptably. In an ideal world the media has to be objective and journalists need to be professional, but in reality this is not always the case. At times the media succeeds and at times it fails to meet its role and objectives. Hiebert (2006) stated that the media has a responsibility to inform and to educate, to tell us

not only what is happening today, but also why it is happening and what it will mean to us tomorrow.

### **Environmental Education through Different Media**

Environmental education through the media is believed to play an important or even dominant role in creating environmental awareness. All kinds of media play their respective role in spreading specific awareness. Our Politicians also recognized the potential of media in creating environmental awareness. But journalists when writing on environmental issues offer neither scientific explanation nor background information. They represent only environmental issues that are event based or on at the top of the political agenda.

Despite all the limitations of media in increasing awareness of environmental problems, and further the role of all kinds of media is needed to be understood. There is no doubt that the traditional media also create awareness (Buell 2005) through direct interaction and communication (Hiebert 2006) of an individual with his family, friends, neighbors or environmental activists. The frequency of discussions on environmental issues or the use of traditional media is also required to spread environmental awareness to every section of the society.

### **Challenges of Environmental Reporting**

The quality and the quantity of the information that the public gets from the media is directly related to, how well a journalist performs his professional duty. There are many challenges of environmental reporting like ignorance of environment issues, scarcity of information, lack of editorial support, pressure from industry and lack of skill and training. To cover environmental stories journalists require an understanding of the science involved and environmental laws governing these issues.

One the other hand while covering such a critical issues journalists themselves often feel confused. Journalists lack access to accurate, timely, clear and understandable information on environmental issues. Laekemariam (2000) concluded in his study that journalists and editors themselves have no clue about what the environment is.

### Conclusion

In India and other developing countries, people are extremely dependent on natural resources which lead to the depletion and degradation of the environment. Lack of environmental awareness by parts of the society, media experts and environmentalists leads to an even worse condition. According to different reports, India is facing a trouble of ecological balance activated by rapid population growth and exploitation of natural resources.

Media can play an important role in stimulating discussions on the environmental issues. Recent developments in India and at a global level show that environmental problems require more media attention. The media should create awareness about the conditions of environmental resources and motivation for proper utilization and management of these resources. Strong environmental conscience and sensitivity should be created by giving environmental issues due consideration in their output, broadcast and print.

The government must put the environmental issues on its agenda. Media is an important source of information for most of people in India, therefore, coverage and presentation of environment issues in the media should be in easily understandable language. More media coverage should

be given to highly dangerous areas, where environmental degradation is going on at a frightening rate.

It is found that insufficient environmental information, lack of awareness about the environment, inappropriate information delivery and communication system are making the situation worst. Along with this, lack of the necessary skill and training on environment by professional journalists are major challenges for covering and reporting correct environmental issues. It is clear that when it comes to environmental issues, journalists for the most part are environmentally or scientifically ignorant.

### **Recommendations**

- Trained Journalists can better analyze different information that they have, and can write their program's scripts with confidence. These qualities can make a program more effective interesting and educational.
- The impact of human activities on environment resources are news stories that need to be told. More emphasis should be given on stories of effects of human activities on environment.
- Fundamental to success in environmental protection is ensuring high level commitment to the environment. Studies revealed that one of the major challenges before effective environmental protection is inadequate upper-level commitment and leadership.
- This is a new area of research in which media and environmental awareness are combined; there is a need for more comprehensive research to get better results.
- Trainings of journalists on various environmental issues are very important. When journalists themselves would be aware only then they can create environmental awareness.

- Universities and colleges in the country need to develop a curriculum for environmental journalism.

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