

Affecting the Psyche: Sensational News Media and Associated Psychological Consequences

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Abstract

News plays an important function to make people informed and educated. We are living in a world abundant with media which provides people with news. Television has evolved as a prominent news media over the time. Commercialization of journalism and market-oriented practices have done severe damage to the news industry. A shift from facts and information to mere sensationalism is a visible outcome of this unethical practices. The focus on negative news and the exaggerated presentation is causing several psychological problems. This study is an attempt to understand the perceptions of students on their TV news watching habits and its consequent psychological effects.

Keywords: News media, TV news, Sensationalism, Psychological effects,

Introduction

News media happen to be an integral part of human life as it keep one updated with information and make them aware about their surroundings. It makes individuals conscious of the society and world in general. The advent of TV channels devoted only to news was a great leap in this regard. India is abundant with news channels in English as well as regional languages catering to the needs of a larger population of the country. Much has happened over the temperament and presentation of news in these channels. Stiffen competition for market and TRP ratings decide the working of a news industry. Sensationalism of news has become the norm. It may be strange to understand that television which always perceived to be an entertaining and relaxing medium has now a reason for many psychological effects also (“The Psychological Effects of TV News,” n.d.).

The present study tries to understand the news media watching behavior of students and their perceptions regarding televised news along with the psychological consequences rendered by this media.

Sensationalism

The sensationalism has been around ever since early human began telling stories, it dates back to news ballads in Europe during the late 1500s (Bird, 1992) reactions to the 19th century circulation wars between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst and ‘yellow journalism’

at the end of the Second World War; strongly resemble the damning tone of current public discourse about sensationalism (Altschull, 1990; Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960). Stephensen finds sensationalism serves the function of spreading information to the less-literate audiences and strengthening the social fabric. (Stephens, 2006)

Interestingly, definitions of the word *sensational* developed a negative connotation a few decades after the rise of the Penny Press; over the years, the negative undertones have intensified (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001)

The recent preoccupation with tabloid news should therefore be put into historical perspective rather than presented as a crisis unique to contemporary times.

The Dictionary definitions of the word *sensational* has the same meaning from “intended to be shocking and exiting” (Sensational, n.d.) causing great public interest and excitement (Sensational, n.d.). In defining the term, scholars and media critics assume that sensationalism provokes the senses and emotions of audience members: Sensationalism stimulates “unwholesome emotional responses” (Mott, 1962, p. 442), emphasizes “emotion for emotion’s sake” (Emery & Emery, 1978).

The profit motive is most often identified as the impetus for sensational journalistic practice. Sensational news is apparently designed to attract attention in the name of high viewership ratings (Berkowitz, 1993; Scott & Gobetz, 1992).

Psychological Effects of Watching News Media

Although television newscast is an important news medium (Hargreaves & Commission, 2002), only a limited number of studies have examined the psychological impact of watching news.

The psychological consequences rendered by news media is an area that needs to be studied in detail. Although there are studies that feature television as a medium that can cause fear, alienation, and mistrust in heavy viewers (Gerbner, Gros, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986), communication studies have not evaluated the possibility that news media can cause psychological consequences. And yet, a plethora of communication studies suggest that media news coverage can be unduly negative (Combs & Slovik, 1979; Coleman, 1993; Daly & Chasteen, 1997). It has been seen that disturbing news events via news television, radio and print sources can be a greater source of stress. Advances in media technology and economic changes during the latter half of the twentieth century have increased the prevalence and availability of news sources as well as their negative, sensational, and graphic nature (Coleman, 1993; Hickey, 1998; Shenk, 1997).

Psychologists, over the time have tend to study the effects of exposure to the news media. Individuals shown news bulletins edited to display negatively valenced material demonstrated increase in both anxiety and sad mood (Johnston & Davey, 1997). People who are anxious about a particular topic may be more likely to attend to news media information regarding that topic, which because of the sensational, ubiquitous nature, will in turn, increase anxiety, regardless of actual risk factors (Slovic, 1987).

Hobfoll, Bridges, Lomranz, Eyal and Tzemach, 1989) found a significant relationship between major negative news events and the rates of depression in a study during the Israel-Lebanon war of 1982. The case can certainly be made that exposure to news sources could affect people's view of the world and of threats to their own well-being and safety, and so result in depression.

Methodology

The study focuses on the effect of news media on the psychological well beings of the viewers. Since the study focuses on the personal opinions, feelings, experiences and perceptions of the viewers, a qualitative data collection method of in depth interview is chosen. One-on-one interview were conducted on a random basis among post graduate students and research scholars of Pondicherry University, a central university from south India till the data reached a saturation point.

In interview, the questions were unstructured, and the students were allowed to talk freely. Questions were purposefully asked about the media coverage on events and political turmoil that happened after chief minister Jayalalitha's death in Tamilnadu and row over the screening of Hindi film *Padmavat*, to elicit more details under the scope of the study. Elicited narratives were analyzed to establish relationship between sensationalism and psychological consequences.

Observations

To the surprise of the researcher, almost every interviewee agreed that their dependency on television to get information or perspectives is very low.

“I don't want to waste my time listening to TV news” one girl said.

This is a prevailing sentiment everybody shared. Most of them considered watching televised news as a waste of time that fails to equip them with new information or insights. A dearth of factual information, biased version of stories and emotionally driven debates cannot gratify the students. They depend their smart phones and make use of various applications to get instant news. Many of the students agreed that they depend newspapers more, when it comes to serious information gathering and detailed analysis.

“The noise is too bad, I lose my sleep if I watch the prime-time news debate” a research scholar opined.

The sound and fury of TV news is found unfavorable by many. Some students mentioned about a sleeping disorder when they watch primetime news debates. The escalation in noise caused by the arguments between panelists, shouting anchors and dramatic sound scores were described affecting the mind. The main accusation was that the sensational news disrupts the peace of mind and ‘make it hyper active always’.

Difficult to focus or concentrate on studies was another problem as these news debates creates a “turmoil” and it takes time to “settle” your mind. One boy said that he doesn't watch

news channels during examination days, because it affects his studies. The use of fast moving words, stark colors, glittering graphics are found ‘unnecessary’ and ‘cheap’ by the students apart from the quality of debates- substandard arguments, ill-mannered panelists, aggressive anchors and insignificant topics.

“News people are obsessed with all the bad things in the world and I want to keep away from these negative vibes” was the comment of a girl while discussing the media celebration over the controversy regarding the film *Padmavat*.

Media propagating negativity and creating a bad mood is an aspect that pops up often during every interview. Focusing too much on violence, corruption, terrorism, crime, controversies, and misdeeds of politicians is transmitting a pessimistic mood and escalates a tendency to get depressed. There is a need for more positive and feel good stories to be included. Students feel that a newspaper or a web portal is more useful that they can skip the unwanted news, but this option is not possible on television. Choices for the viewer is limited and it persuade them to choose alternative options.

Most of the news and discussions are oriented towards the creation of anxiety and fear among the viewers. The anxiety driven media fills their slots with emotional driven stories and biased perspectives. Factual information and rational journalism is too rare in the field. Creating a hype over silly issues and maintaining that intensity for days and all of a sudden drop it and pick another issue has become a common practice. “It is almost like a festival for them”, on scholar said remarking the media reportage of political disruptions in Tamilnadu. Emotionally charged and fear mongering TV news makes a good number of students keep a distance from this media. All the participants were saying that they cannot stand a TV news for more than an hour and recommended that the TV media should definitely rethink over their concept of news and its presentation.

It could be seen that students are referring to the sensationalistic style of news media and the psychological issues associated with it, as it discussed in the reviewed literature.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study reveals that youngsters are depending various media over television when it comes to news and information. The sensationalist styles adopted by the news industry could be found as a reason for this trend. It affects the mental health of the people at the expense of their time without providing any useful information. Rather than making the people aware of the happenings and events, TV news media focuses on presenting an exaggerated and distorted version of the events. Stressing on negativity and conflict is affecting the mental health of the viewers. Both in the content of the news and in the form of the presentation, TV news media adopts certain sensational styles. It develops a sad mood, anxiety, panic and sometimes traits of depression. The symptoms are told as sleeping disorders and issues with a lack of concentration on studies.

The television news channels are a good source of keeping the viewers informed with latest developments and analysis of events and incidents. They should provide information and education in a positive manner without adhering to sensation and psychological hazards to its viewers.

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