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Private TV Channels not sensitive to Environmental concerns

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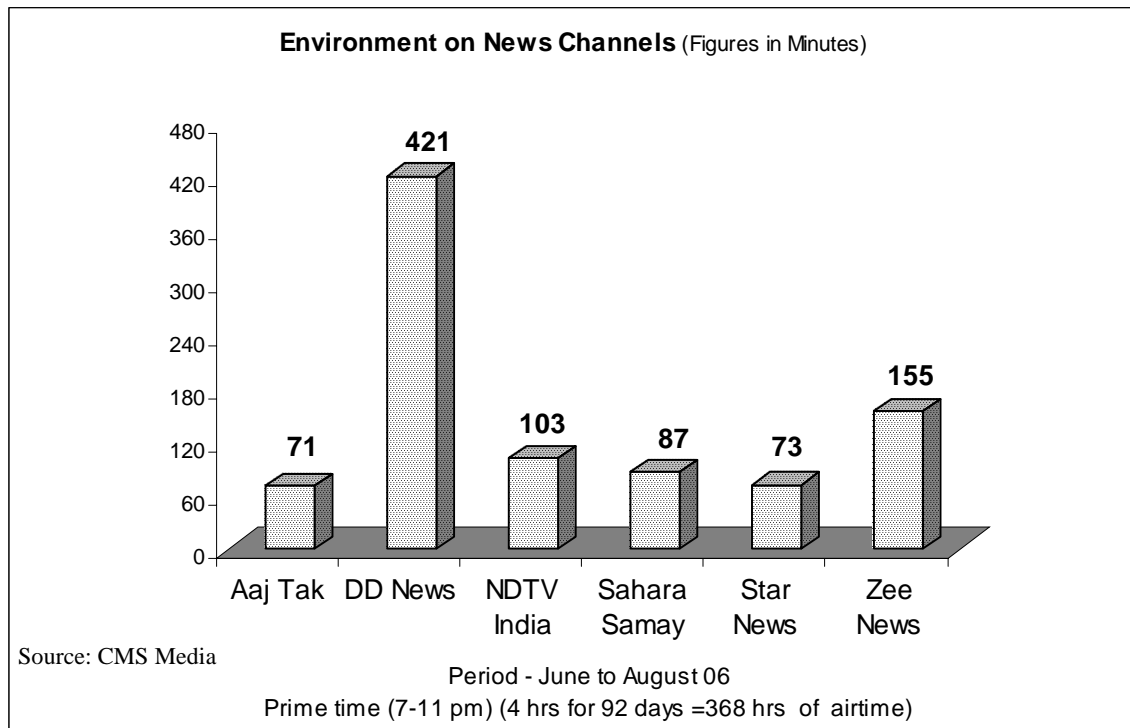
(Deputy Director, CMS Media Lab)

Media plays a critical role in shaping the future of a nation as it informs, educates and sensitises people on various issues day-after-day. This helps lay the blueprint of a country's growth path. It is this immense role and responsibility that empowers media. For media and the people this function is of paramount significance.

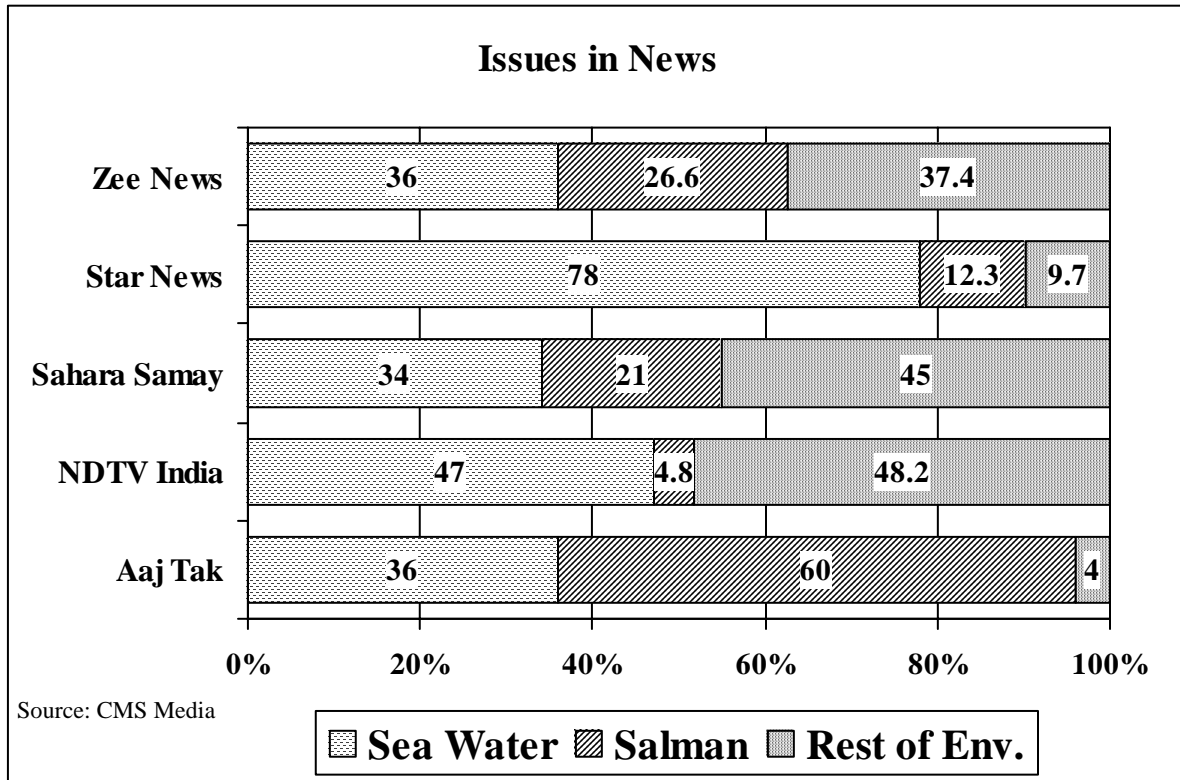
It is thus expected that media will report and raise all issues of national concern. However, if one sees environmental reporting in the rapidly growing cable television medium, which also has an enormous impact and influence, there is a huge vacuum in understanding, addressing and sensitising people about these issues. Falling forest cover, dwindling biodiversity, growing despair in the rural areas from the reversal in agriculture production, drinking water crisis both in rural and urban areas, severely polluted and toxin-laden rivers, lakes and air, The list of our country's environmental woes is long. India is beset by environmental crisis. If the country is to abate the crisis, mass media needs to play a critical role through awareness raising. Extensive exploitation and years of neglect of our environment have impacted life in every sphere; alas, media doesn't have its ear to the ground

The Centre for Media Studies, in its analysis of popular Hindi news channels, found that Doordarshan National gave 1.9 per cent of its prime air time (7 to 11 pm) to environmental reporting. From June 1 to August 31 prime time news was analysed in this study. In quantitative terms, the channel gave 7 hrs and 10 mins out of 368 hrs of air time to environmental issues. This, however, is the most positive data available from among Hindi news channels in the CMS study. The channels included in the study are Aaj Tak, Zee News, NDTV India, Sahara Samay, Star News, besides Doordarshan National.

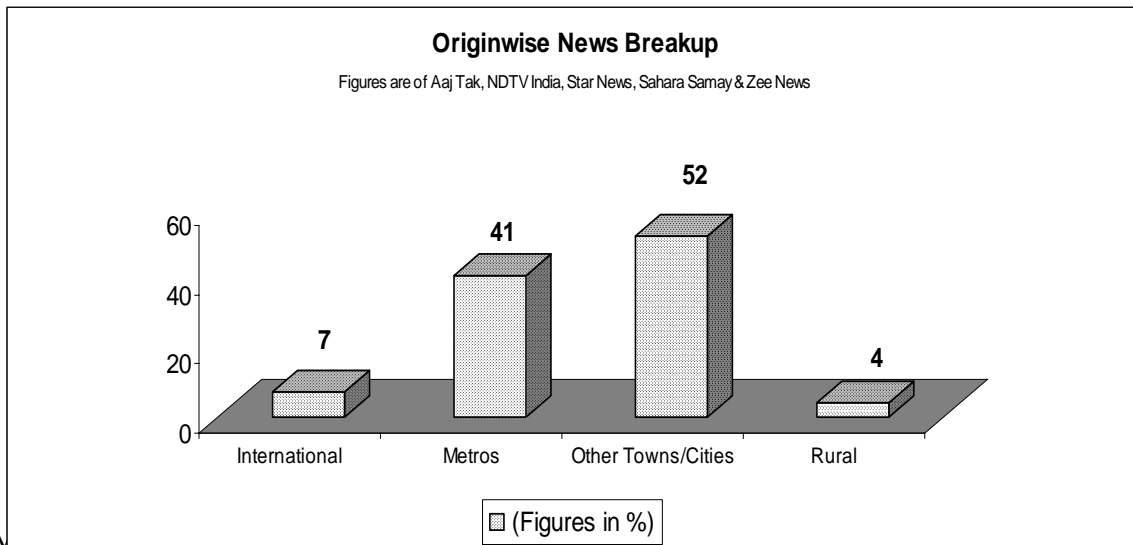
Environmental reporting was rather found to be dismal on these channels. In the study period of three months, Zee News gave 2 hrs and 35 min of total coverage to the subject, NDTV India 1hr and 43 min coverage, Sahara Samay gave 1 hr 27 min coverage, Star New 1hr:13 min coverage, and Aaj Tak, the market leader in Hindi belt, gave just about 1hr and 11 min of total environment coverage during the monitoring period. In percentage points air time given to environmental issues comes to 0.70 per cent for Zee News, 0.46% for NDTV India and 0.39% for Sahara Samay. It is noteworthy that Aaj Tak and Star News, with a combined viewership of 46% for Hindi News channels, gave just about 0.32% each of the total airtime to environmental issues.



Poor air time allocation to environmental concerns is not the only inadequacy on these channels. The quality of programmes often leaves much to be desired. A bulk of environmental coverage on these channels is indicative of their preferences. Aaj Tak's 96.6% of environmental coverage was drawn from Jodhpur court's verdict in black buck poaching case against Salman Khan and reports on 'sea water turning sweet'. Coverage on these two issues in relation to total coverage on environment comprised 51.8% on NDTV India, 55% on Sahara Samay, 90.3% on Star News and 62.4% on Zee News. Surely, celebrities do make news. But community efforts in the upkeep of environment are far more important for people to know. On the coverage of 'sweet sea water', it is necessary to recall that after heavy rainfall in Mumbai, Mahim creek water was reported sweet with the local habitants associating it with a miracle. But isn't media expected to be more discerning? It must distinguish news from hearsay.



The origin of environmental news on these channels also reflects the media disconnect with the environmental concern. As much as 93 per cent reporting is done from urban India which represents only 28 per cent of population and approximately 3.3 per cent of country's geographical area. Mere 4 per cent reporting on rural areas is clearly not representative of our environmental concerns. Even international reporting on environment, which is largely human interest stories of animals, is far greater than the reporting on rural areas.



Source: CMS Media Lab

However, in contrast to private news channels, the coverage on Doordarshan National had both vibrancy of variety in news issues/discussions and origin. During the period, the channel dwelt on significant environmental issues and debates. But, that too, by no measure, addresses environmental crises in the country. What is required of media is a determined approach to investigate and reflect our environmental reality in order to sensitise and awaken the people. This will set rolling a corrective collective initiative.

The period of study coincided with monsoon that flooded many areas in 16 of our states. It drew a total of 24 hrs of air time on all channels, including Doordarshan National. However, in the entire period there was no coverage on the possible causes of such flooding. In doing this, the media accepted floods as a natural process. Every year, the earth's fresh water replenishment that rains bring plays havoc with our crops and people. Every year a good part of our gains in GDP is lost due to environmental losses. In Assam alone floods cause a yearly damage of Rs 1000 crore and more. What's the country's cost of environmental damages?