

Environment News Broadcast in Malaysia: An Analysis of Prime -Time News Coverage in Local Television Channels¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of environmental news and analyses how the environment is being covered in local Malaysian television channels in their prime-time news broadcast. The news broadcast samples were taken from local television channels TV1 and TV 3 in Malaysia. We analysed how the environmental news is framed and the mode of presentation in these channels. This research carried out in the Malaysian context; contribute to the understanding of news media and how the environment is being represented in local Malaysian television channels. This paper will also discuss the various types of environmental issues covered, quality of production, and the narrative of environmental news. We recorded samples of television news episodes and subsequently, transcribed and coded the document with a set of coding elements before the data was analyzed to arrive at the findings. The present study largely seems to suggest that a variety of narrative style and patterns of reporting environmental news have been adopted in local Malaysian channels. Results of the analysis reveal that many of the local environmental stories intersect with science, economics, politics and social issues.

Introduction

In Malaysia television news, particularly in local channels such as TV1 and TV3 play an important role by telecasting environmental issues and thus creating awareness on environment. In this regard, M C Kibben (1992:9) the well known environmental writer saw television as one of the most important channel for providing information to the public and argued that “the implication of television’s pervasive and studious inattention to the environment results in societal neglect of environmental issues.” The studies conducted in Malaysia and overseas (Shanthi et al. 2009) indicate that the majority of audiences rely on broadcast media like television for environmental issues. Television channels provide a platform for public debate on the environmental issues and on various policy decisions. Anne Dunn (2005: 140) argues that television news is not only a popular source of information but also it enjoys a high degree of credibility. The work further argues that opinion polls and rating surveys show that television news has become both the primary and most believed source of news. Similarly Hakansson (2000:7) stated that “it is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that the way the news media portray public events is of importance for public knowledge and opinion.” A recent nationwide study conducted in Malaysia (Shanthi et al.2009) among young people argued that television informs and create awareness on environmental issues. Therefore, television news shoulders the responsibility of informing and creating awareness among the public about the various environmental issues thereby influencing changes in their practices towards environment.

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In television news, the narrative approach adopted in constructing the stories plays an important role in drawing the attention of the audience to the subject matter. As argued by Anne Dunn (2005, 142) one way of keeping the audience attention is to employ narrative techniques to tell a good story. She further argues that television news in particular borrowed the narrative structures of prime-time entertainment programming. Favouring the narrative approach, former NBC executive Rewan Frank, in a memo to his staff (quoted in Epstein 2000) wrote:

Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action, a beginning, middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative.

Agreeing with the above point, James Shanahan et al. (1997: 149) further emphasised that there is a lot of difference between news that merely reports facts and the news that tells 'stories'. He contends that even though news is focused on facts and rational explanation of the subject matter, because news itself is a form of entertainment the narrative factors play an important role in the way environment information is communicated. At the same time, a few researchers have also expressed their fears that television news portrayal of environment were sensationalized and dramatized if too much emphasis is focused on narrative and thereby producing a distortion of the news value of the story (Gorney, 1992). Therefore, it is necessary for the producers to handle the narrative elements carefully in producing environmental news stories with out losing the distinctive form of news like the aspect of 'real' and objectivity. In a similar study, while looking at the role of narrative in environmental stories in the prime- time television, James Shanahan et al. (1997: 149) also argued that:

Imagery tends to replace content in science journalism and that the actual scientific research process tends to disappear. Also, the studies show that science and environmental coverage is often linked to highly dramatic events.

Similarly Nimmo and Combs (1982) argued that melodrama was a key feature of the story and environmental stories require dramatic events to motivate the coverage. Hence, it is essential to examine how environmental issues are incorporated into the conventions of story telling. It was also noticed that television news journalism tends to ignore very risky phenomena if there were no dramatic reason for presenting a story. As it is important to inform the public about risky phenomena, television channels should present periodically environmental stories irrespective of having dramatic events to carry the story. Discussing the environmental news in the media, Robert Lox (2006:172) in his study centered on environmental communication and public sphere described the five factors that influence news production:

1. Media Political Economy
2. Gate keeping and the Environmental Bent
3. Criteria for News Worthiness
4. Media Frames
5. Norms of Objectivity and Balance

He also pointed out that:

Journalist have difficulty in dealing with environmental news assignments, firstly the inconspicuous nature of many environmental problems poses a difficulty for journalists... Secondly environmental news can be difficult to cover because it requires some degree of scientific understanding or complex environmental problems on the part of journalists.

The review of various studies on environmental news reporting indicated the importance of studying environment news and narrative, and techniques in presenting the environmental news. Television news reporting of environment plays a key role in safeguarding the environment interests in Malaysia and thus a study of this kind is important in the context of Malaysia. Furthermore, a thorough literature search indicated that not much work has been done on how the broadcast media represent the environment to the public. Many studies have increasingly looked at how environmental issues have been represented in the printed media and largely ignored the medium of television (James Shanahan et al, 1997). Considering that large numbers of Malaysian population depend on the broadcast media especially the prime-time news telecast for developing their understanding and concern regarding the environment, it is necessary to study the role played by the prime-time news broadcast in Malaysia.

The increasing number of television channels in the last decade, most of them being privately owned channels except for TV1 & TV2 which are funded by the Ministry of Information, Malaysia. Among the private channels we have TV3 also known as *Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Bhd.* In addition, audiences in Malaysia have the option of choosing Astro network of channels which has more than 50 channels comprising many national and international channels. Among the local television channels the popular news bulletin comes from TV1 & TV3 which consistently broadcast environmental news stories in their daily newscast. Thus, the present study has been undertaken in order to understand the news broadcast with particular reference to public channels in Malaysia.

The main objectives of the study was to see how the environment is being represented in the local channels in their prime-time news telecast, to see what aspects and issues of environment are being covered and to analyze the framing effects of environmental news. We will also look at how interestingly the stories are presented in terms of production quality and narrative structure. This paper would aim to answer the following important questions and issues:

- To see how the various environmental sources were used to frame the news?
- How frequently are these channels broadcasting environmental stories in their prime-time newscast?
- To see whether there is a strong dependence on government sources for framing the news?
- To critically evaluate the narrative structure of the news reports.
- To see what aspects of environmental issues were covered?

The study would try to make a significant contribution to the understanding of environment broadcast news in Malaysia. The findings could be used to inform the status of environment communication in Malaysia to policy makers, media owners, civil society groups and the government for the sake of protecting the environment.

Methodology

The study would aim to understand how the environment is being represented in prime – time news. The study adopts content analysis and framing method to analyze the data collected for the research. For this study, we have recorded six months of news coverage and looked at the representation of environmental news. However, for this paper a sample of 14 days of newscast episodes were taken from both the channels i.e. TV1 and TV3 during the month of December 2008. The data was video recorded periodically during the telecast time using a DVD recorder. The samples were later segmented for environmental stories and they were transcribed, coded and analyzed to arrive at the findings and to fulfil the objectives of the research.

Findings

In the beginning, the study looked into the various environmental issues that were covered during the sample period of two weeks. The table 1 given below lists the details of environmental issues covered during the sample period. As we can see most of the environmental issues reported in TV1 and TV3 were related to landslide. This is mainly because the samples were collected in the month of December 2008 when the tragic landslide incident took place at *Bukit Antarabangsa*² in which five people died and many were injured. There were many reports on the *Bukit Antarabangsa* landslide informing the public about the status of the disaster and the follow-up activities undertaken by the government. The month of December is also known as ‘flooding month’³ especially for those who live in the State of Kelantan and Terengganu. The reports on floods basically focused on the situation in the states and the plight of the victims.

From the table 1, we can conclude that environmental news presented in TV1 and TV3 are mainly about disasters and risk associated environmental problems. This finding ascertains the previous findings (James Shanahan et al. 1997:149) that the broadcast networks are influenced by the dramatic value of a story than by the actual inherent environmental risk in the story. Thus, very risky phenomenon such as global warming, greenhouse effect, ozone depletion might well be ignored if there were no particular dramatic reason for presenting a story (Greenberg et al. 1989).

² *Bukit Antarabangsa landslide was a landslide that occurred on 6 December 2008, in Ulu Klang, Selangor, Malaysia. Five people were killed and more than eight others were feared buried. The landslide, which had buried 14 bungalows in Taman Bukit Mewah and Taman Bukit Utama, occurred at about 4 a.m.*

³ *Floods in the months of November and December are very usual in Malaysia especially in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu which will be affected by heavy rains from north east monsoon. Year 2008, saw was one of the worst flood incidents where more than 7000 people were evacuated and sent to the evacuation centers. The water level at rivers had exceeded the danger mark.*

Table 1

Various Environmental Issues Covered in the News Samples

Issues	Number of News Stories	
	TV1-Berita Nasional	TV3-Bulletin Utama
Landslide	14	8
Soil erosion	3	1
Flood	1	5
Wildlife/conservation	1	3
Tsunami	1	-
River pollution	-	1
Air pollution	-	2
Others	1	3
TOTAL	21	23

Framing of Environmental News

It was found both TV1 and TV3 are very consistent in reporting environmental issues during the sample period. Stages of development of *Bukit Antarabangsa* landslide disaster were reported almost everyday since the incident took place. Most of the time, there is at least one environmental issue being reported in both the channels. Among the various news sources available for presenting an environmental news report like the government agencies, non-governmental organizations, scientists and environmentalists, it was observed that both the channels relied on authoritative sources and they were cited very frequently. Most often, these sources are representatives from the government ministries or institutions. Government sources were cited two or more times in at least half of the news stories during the sample period. This finding supports the notion that there is a strong dependence on government sources in environmental news stories in Malaysia. Authoritative sources used were:

- Deputy Prime Ministers
- Ministers/Chief Ministers
- President of Local Councils
- The Chief of PDRM (Police Force), Army, BOMBA(Fire Service), etc
- Representatives from government agencies/institutions
- High-Profile Public Servants

We have found that the above sources were repeatedly used in the environmental stories. The environmental news stories, however, used relatively a very few scientific sources (Landslide Report 13/12/08, TV1). The environmental stories did not include views from environmentalists with the exception of one news story which had a representative from a NGO (Love Nature Society), who shares his views on pig farming in TV3 (Perspective 2008, 25/12/08). In this regard Hansen (1990) says:

Environmental issues, in the television news discourse, are defined largely through established and 'legitimate' social institutions. The potentially alternative definitions that could be expected to emerge largely through

environmental interest groups are given only a relatively small platform in the actual news discourse.

Public citizens were second most frequently appearing sources in the news. The victims and residents were also used as source of news, they interviewed two or more victims in particular news. Frequently appearing public citizen sources included, representatives from residents committee, Victims of landslide, and general public. Through the sources used in the samples we can also infer that the reporters from both the channels used the most readily available sources such as representatives of the government, public citizens and victims who are generally found near the event site. Considering that television news plays an important role in disseminating information during disasters to the public, TV1 and TV3 channels have reported the disaster story on ‘*Bukit Antarbangsa*’ landslide immediately on time. Furthermore, there was also follow up stories updating the statistics of information on disasters, causalities, relief efforts and so on. However, the news reports would have been much more interesting, if there were views from scientists or environmentalists apart from the government spokes persons. No scientific explanation was given such as what was the actual cause behind the landslide to occur and why it only affected the 14 bungalows and not the houses nearby. The channels could have interviewed individuals such as geo-technical engineers, slope engineers or geologist to give more detailed explanation on the causes of the landslide. Also the usage of variety of sources in the news would have given a balanced view regarding the issues and also provided much needed balance and objectivity in journalism. In addition to the framing analysis of environmental broadcast the study looked at how and what sources were used in reporting the environmental news. The following section illustrates the sources used and content of news:

Sources and News content in the Environmental News Reports:

From the table 2 given below, we can conclude that number of sources used in the news varied and unpredictable. However, the number of sources in the news influenced the overall duration of the story i.e. the more the number of sources in the news the longer the duration of the news. News that was presented without any sources was basically reporting on updates or flashbacks of previous events.

Table 2

Number of news sources used in the reports	Number of news stories	
	TV1	TV3
0	3	4
1	6	7
2	1	3
3	7	4
4	3	2
5 and more	1	3
TOTAL	21	23

Natural and manmade disasters were the most common events reported by both the channels. Both the channels reported more on incidents of disaster and aftermath with some related visuals. However, coverage lacked scientific explanations of the causes of the incidents. The analysis of the samples also reveals that reports on certain critical environmental issues were

absent in the news. The reason could be as stated by Ramli et al. (2008: 2) in their study focused on the media advocacy and the environmental NGO's that certain critical issues such as climate change, global warming, greenhouse effect and ozone depletion are rather complex and slow moving to be portrayed and explained through the media. Besides that, we can say that both news channels were reliable, responsible and timely in their presentation of news thereby serving the basic functions of media coverage of environmental issues as stated by Solesbury (1976):

1. to command attention (to raise the awareness and draw the attention of the public and the authorities)
2. to claim legitimacy (building credibility and authority)
3. to invoke actions (getting the authorities and individuals to do something)

It was noticed that on certain occasions the news was very 'information-dense'. For example, the news on Development Acts and Hillside Order (11/12/08) was very factual and may not be understood by a lay person due to the usage of technical jargons and the amount of information. Therefore, while reporting these types of news, the statement of the officials should be simplified because the viewers could never get much beyond the headlines.

Most of the coverage of environmental issues in the channels has centered on environmental risks and has emphasized problems but did not discuss solutions. However, one could argue that it is due to lack of time in news productions as it is time bound and doesn't provide enough time for the producers to include all the aspects of the issue. Also most of the news frames focused on the immediate incident (landslide and flood) and did not give details of the context and the underlying issues behind it. For example, the effects of the landslide incident were discussed repeatedly, but the cause is only mentioned once without further explanation. The sentences such as, '*this problem could be due to..... or it is said that the cause of this incident is*' are used to explain the causes. These statements are lacking authentic and legitimate views from the concerned. Again, this could be due to the lack of time or unavailability of sources to explain the exact cause of the problem. However, not all the news stories were reported in such a manner. In some places, the causes of an incident were explained with surety but again not in detail. Also it was noticed that credible sources were not used to explain the real cause of the incident. The channels used "just the facts" approach and relied on officials from the ministry or government department as the main source or the primary definers of the news. In this regard, Hansen (1991:449) says:

Studies of media coverage of environmental issues have repeatedly shown that it shares much of the 'authority-orientation' of other types of coverage, and that environmental pressure group organizations and environmental activists do not fare well as 'primary definers'.

Analysis also exposed that both the authorities and the residents (victims) used the television medium as a platform to communicate with each other. For example, the authorities used the media to share the latest development of the landslide tragedy with the public. At the same time, the residents (victims) used the media to request or urge the authorities to take action. In that sense, the news media was playing the role of a mediator between both the parties and thereby providing a public sphere for people to express their opinion to the authorities. The headline or main content of the news was usually taken from the comments of the

government officials. Most of the time, the news was reported in detail but sometimes they lacked substance or suffer content limitations, typically providing little qualification especially when reporting on flood issues or latest news. May be, this is due to the over emphasis on images rather than the issues. Furthermore, the motive behind these environmental news stories seems to inform and update viewers on the latest environmental issues in the country. However, only a fewer number of reports were produced with the intention to create strong awareness among the public towards environment. One of them is *Perspective 2008, TV3* which highlighted the environmental problems that occurred in 2008 and demonstrated the role of human beings in saving the environment. If we examine the samples for news values, it was noticed that 'conflict' between various parties is not highlighted in the stories.

Most of the news was follow up from the previous stories. Flashbacks of previous similar incidents were showed a couple of times. Sometimes, they were too repetitive. For example, the reports covering the reactions of the people in *Bukit Antarabangsa* were repeated many times by both channels. Other than that, the building work and cleaning & clearing work in ground zero also were shown repeatedly. Most of the news was presented plainly (not sensationalized) and presented based on statements, views and information given by the sources. As the samples were collected in the month of December 2008, most of the news was focused on the major disaster story of the month '*Bukit Antarabangsa* tragedy'. Other environmental issues that were reported during the sample period are news on dead dolphin, floods, forest conservation and water pollution.

News Presentation

In the medium of television, we have both visual and sound narrative structures; some genres of television might place emphasis on visual while others might place emphasis on audio (Anne Dunn, 2005). In a typical news bulletin, we see many forms of news stories starting from the simplest mode of a newsreader talking to camera with graphics displayed or Live Voice Over (LVO) where the newsreader reads over an edited video report live. The most developed and elaborate news story is a package, where sequence of visuals are narrated by the reporter; sometimes the reporter comes on screen talking to viewers directly to begin or close the story (Piece To Camera).

The study also examined the various narrative forms that were used to present the environmental issues in the selected channels TV1 and TV2 during their prime time news broadcast. Most of the reports in both TV1 and TV3 were identified under the 'Voice Over Package' mode of presentation (Refer to Table 3). This presentation mode focuses on the visual aspect of the story with the reporter narrating over the pictures that illustrates events, sometimes with sound bites from sources, such as those people who witnessed the event and so on. This technique relies upon the visuals and can keep viewers interested in the story by communicating information. However, the risk in relying on visuals entirely is reporters could miss out some important information that needs to be communicated to the audience due to the lack of visuals (Anne Dunn, 2005). 'Reporter on location' mode is mainly used by the channels to present the latest development of an incident or to inform the public on a new environmental case. Sometimes, here the reporter works as a 'mediator' to bring forward the issue to the local authorities. This mode was used in presenting the *Bukit Antarabangsa* story especially the follow up stories after the incident.

The other environmental reports apart from *Bukit Antarabangsa* were quite short, lasted only for one to two minutes. Most of them were presented in ‘reporter on location’ mode with visuals. It was also observed especially in TV1 that when ever ‘Speech/Interview’ mode was used, the visual of the person visiting the affected location is shown especially when the individuals were from the government agencies and they are releasing a long statement regarding the issue. Also it was noticed that some of the visuals shown in both channels were repetitive especially when the same issue is discussed. For example, visuals of landslide zone and the buildings involved in *Bukit Antarabangsa* tragedy were shown repeatedly. In fact, same visual clips were used on both the channels. Perhaps, both the channels have drawn the visuals of the incident from the Malaysian news agency *Bernama* and hence same visuals were shown in both the channels. However, the visuals shown in the channels were of good quality, well edited and crisp in terms of timing. Therefore, we can say the technical quality of the video was good and it was meeting the required broadcast standards. It also indicates that the media owners are using professional people and equipment for recording these news visuals. The following table gives the details of various formats used in the news reports.

Table 3

Mode of presentation utilized in the news (TV1 & TV3)	Visuals/ Audio
Read : Anchor talking head without any video	The anchor and sometime pictures or graphics are used.
Voice Over Package	Visual footage with voice of the reporter.
Reporter on location	Reporter and then cuts to video recorded earlier and narrates over the footage.
Anchor sends story to reporter who is on the location live. “Live Cross”	Reporter and the visual of the location are shown.
Speech/Interview	Interviewee (the individual is shown)
Phone calls	Still photo of the reporter and visuals of the news is shown.
News features (documentary style)	Visuals/ music with narrative elements incorporated.

Our analysis also revealed that there were very few news features on environment in both the channels during the sample period which is very low compared to the news stories on environment. As we know the difference between news and news features is that the news stories happen and you don’t set them up and circumstances are beyond our control (Griffiths.R, 1998:113). On the other hand, features are not simply reporting the events as they happened and they are not time bound. For example, features can allow producers to profile somebody who is an activist of environment or somebody doing activities towards environment which are unique in its way. Also features being longer than the regular news

coverage, it gives more creative freedom with the pictures and in the presentation. Most importantly, it involves the producer more into the subject in terms of collecting more information by doing research, talking to experts in depth and looking for variety of pictures to build visual sequences. Also news features provide more room for different locations unlike mostly single location coverage in news reports. In addition, it gives scope for creativity in terms of directing the visual sequences, camera angles, movements and framing. Certainly, these production values will enhance the quality of the story and thereby attract the target audience more effectively in identifying with the particular environmental topic. At the same time, as pointed out by Anne Dunn (2005:152) 'the increasingly cinematic use of the television medium is problematic in news because it comprises its truth claims.' Therefore, changes to the narrative form should be dealt cautiously without losing the distinctive form of television news and its authority.

In a study conducted in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang with secondary school students focusing on developing environment media literacy among young people found the environment news stories broadcast in Malaysian local channels to be monotonous in their presentation and lacking variety (Shanthi et al.2009). To make it interesting to them, they suggested that producers should present the content in newer formats. In other words, what the young people were trying to say was the information should be presented in a narrative form rather than simply relaying the information neutrally to the public. It was observed in the analysis that narrative elements were not often incorporated by the journalists in their news reports. Therefore, by changing the narrative approach in producing environment stories can certainly contribute to the promotion of environmental awareness in the audience regarding the local and global environmental issues.

Overall, the analysis suggested that the quality of reporting could be improved by assigning trained journalists in science and environment to do the reporting. Somewhat similar opinion was expressed by Ramli et al. (2008: 17) in their study:

The NGO's are of the opinion that the Malaysian media is not fully competent in their coverage of environmental issues. Compared to other sectors like economics, business and politics, the media have not expanded their resources to adequately hire trained and experienced journalists to do environmental reporting.

Although the environmental stories are limited in the television news broadcast in Malaysia, TV1 and TV3 included in-depth information and better overall coverage. The visual footage shown in these two channels were interesting. In particular, the channel TV3, narration was interesting, and it gave details of environmental issues. Also it was inferred that TV3 reporters on the location were more enthusiastic about the subject matter.

Conclusion

The study looked at the representation of environmental issues in the prime-time news broadcast of local television channels in Malaysia. The critical analysis of content and style of narrative indicate that the television news broadcast increasingly relied on government sources. Nevertheless, the views and opinions of representatives of local communities, NGOs and news agencies have been incorporated in the narrative of environmental issues. We have shown that the footages selected for this study invariably adopted relevant visual sequences, camera angles, movements with appropriate music.

Both the channels reported promptly and continuously on the disaster incident 'Bukit Antarabangsa' landslide tragedy, which demonstrated their responsibility as a public broadcaster. Also their reports commanded public attention and tried to invoke actions. Similarly, the news reports provided space for public sphere, where the public citizens and the authorities from the government agencies interacted with each other. Besides, it was also noticed that the channels were consistent in reporting environmental issues during the sample period, however, the nature of the stories were mostly related to crisis and disaster oriented like landslides and floods. Environmental stories on other topics were very few and also shorter in duration. To sum up, if the channels dedicate journalists exclusively for producing stories on environmental issues and also include promotion of environmentalism as one of their important tasks in their agenda, they will be able to fulfil their main obligation of enriching the knowledge of public towards environment and thereby changing their attitudes positively.

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