

THE CHANGING PERCEPTION OF YOUNG NEWSPAPER READERS OF BANGALORE WITH THE CHANGED FACE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS

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Introduction

Perception is defined as the act of perceiving, which is “to become aware of directly through any of the senses, especially sight or hearing” which could be right or wrong. On the other hand, reality is defined as “the quality or state of being actual or true.”

Media is said to mirror reality. We the people get this reality from the media. Many watched the bombing of WTC and it is now imprinted in the psyche for life. Similarly, many scenes from media get captured by our inner eye. Our understanding of society and the world around is but a consequence of this exposure to mass media. We therefore live in a mediated world; the media is a window to the reality outside.

All media texts, by definition, are representations of reality. They have been deliberately composed, cropped, edited, written, captioned and censored by their producers and therefore, they are artificial versions of the reality we perceive around us. As

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the world has grown and distances have increased, it is impossible for every one of us to directly perceive reality. We often rely on mass media for that and what is given to us through newspapers, television, radio or the internet is just representation of that reality.

A major percentage of the media consumers are the youth. The youth in Bangalore is increasingly relying on media to get a picture of the world around. There are many sources for news and views for the young. Television, Radio, the Internet and of course, the newspapers paint a picture of the world. The newspapers, credible relative to other mediums, in the city are fanning this quest to understand the reality out there by constantly innovating their product. News comes to us in different shades and colour. The packaging of news adds a whole new perspective to reality. The picture, graphic elements and also the angle taken by a newspaper add to this changed perception.

The Times of India, Bangalore has been increasing its circulation and readership exponentially since the major overhaul in 1996. In the last decade more and more people prefer the TOI over other national and local newspapers as it is seen to be easy to read and without frills. The increase has been phenomenal in the younger age bracket. The Newspaper in Education (NIE) programme of TOI succeeded in converting the school-going kids into loyal customers. As the newspaper is read by a majority of the college-going crowd its impact on their perception of reality calls for research.

Research Methodology

The research question was formulated keeping in mind the deliberate attempt by the Times of India to increase its circulation among the younger readers of Bangalore. The contemporary presentation of news and views, colloquial language, reliance on visual elements and vibrant and young group of reporters sealed the circulation war in favour of the Times of India. Many questions needed an answer: Where do the young readers get their news about the world from? What type of stories do they prefer? Do they find the newspaper credible? And whether what is given in the newspaper accepted unquestionably? For this a research design was evolved.

Content analysis of the Times of India and a survey of the readers were thought to be necessary to link the agenda of the newspaper with the perception of the readers.

Content analysis was undertaken to understand the type of news stories TOI dealt with in a given month. It also throws up the importance the newspaper gives to certain stories over others. In addition, pictures and the captions along with other

visual elements expose the bias in presentation to certain stories/issues. Coding was done independently by three coders who had been trained by the researcher.

A survey of the young college-going readers of the newspaper was undertaken. Some 250 questionnaires were administered among the college students belonging to different colleges and different streams. The colleges were deliberately chosen to give the different geographical areas equal chance to be surveyed.

In addition to the above, some of the journalists belonging to the Times of India were also questioned by the researcher. This was mainly undertaken to find clues to the policies that are behind the editorial decision making that goes into the picking of news, pictures, editing them and presenting them on the front page on a day to day basis. Is there any deliberate attempt to set an agenda by the newspaper through the selection and presentation of certain news over others?

Literature Review

The review of literature was extensive and threw light on similar research in the West. It also provided the theoretical ground for sound research. Effects research is a vast field; there have been exhaustive research for the last 80 years starting with the Payne Funds research into the effects of films on people in the late 1920s in the US. As continued and sustained effects research has thrown light on the effects of consumed media products, there is a huge body of knowledge that has given us the following theories: hypodermic needle model, limited effects model, agenda-setting theory, uses and gratification theory, cultivation theory and social construction of reality. These became the basis for the research in the sense that all aim at trying to get at the reality from different perspectives. Walter Lippmann (Public Opinion) referred to the reality around us as 'pictures in our heads'. We know the world only as we perceive it. Our perceptions are based on learned interpretations. This learning is social: we learn from and among persons in social interaction. The main vehicles which convey this meaning: symbols, including language. These vehicles of meaning together construct: our world-view - our sense of how the world works, what is valuable, why things are the way they are. Reality, insofar as it means to us, is situational, or pragmatic: the context governs our interpretation.

Media shapes the perception of thing we have not experienced personally. This idea was taken to a different level by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw and applied to news media in the form of Agenda Setting function. The mass media by highlighting certain issues set the agenda for public opinion. Keeping the political campaigns in the background they concluded that the main effect of the media to be agenda setting- telling people not what to think but what to think about. The

theory explains the correspondence between the rate at which the media cover a story and the extent to which people think that the story is important. This is mainly an effect of the gate-keeping function of media-selection of what news to report and what not to. Therefore what the public know and care about is a result of media gatekeeping.

The Agenda Setting theory calls for doing a content analysis to know what the media is giving priority to and audience survey poll to find out what the readers/viewers are talking about. The trick is to see causality between the two variables-news one reads in the newspaper is also on the minds of the people.

We know the world as we perceive it. Our perception in turn is related to our learning. One of the main forms of learning in today's world is the mass media. In other words, we construct our reality from the things we see, hear and read. Increasing reliance on mass media for understanding our world means the social reality is constructed from such exposure.

Similarly, heavy exposure to cultural imagery (on television) will shape a viewer's concept of reality. According to the Cultivation theory by George Gerbner, heavy viewing of television creates and cultivates attitudes more consistent with media conjured images of reality than with what reality actually is. Thus, heavy television viewers make assumptions of violence, people, places and other issues which do not hold true to real life.

Content Analysis

The front page of the Times of India gives priority to national news over local stories. Majority of the days a story of national importance is featured on the front page and as the lead story. Being a national newspaper it is but natural for TOI to take a larger view on the issues in the news but at the same time when there are important local stories it is given prominently on the front page.

The newspaper does not give importance to political news. Instead, there is a variety of issues ranging from politics to crime and from infrastructure to business that is displayed on the front page. This is one of the unique selling points of TOI. Not only does it give a national outlook but it touches on all aspects of socio-cultural, political and economic news. The bigger readership base warrants the newspaper to shift from the political centric view of the past to taking up issues that are close to the readers.

Unlike the perception that TOI has banner headlines on a day-to-day basis and thus sensational in its presentation style, we see a variety in the headline sizes.

From multi-column headlines for important stories to single column headlines for less important ones. It is also seen that TOI gives two elements/aspects of the story in the headline most of the time. This is done with the help of a secondary headline just below the main headline.

It is important to see if the stories are reported by the correspondents/reporters of TOI or they get them from the news agencies, which is common to all newspapers. Almost all the stories featured on the front page happen to be generated by the staff of TOI. This is a testimony to the sheer size of the newspaper and the policy to give the stories from their own correspondent priority over news agency copies. As TOI is published from multiple centres, it has the advantage over most other newspapers when it comes to gathering of news around the country. Except for stories emanating from Washington or London, all other foreign stories are news agency supplied.

One interesting aspect of the stories on the front page is their length. Very rarely does the story go beyond 500 words; mostly stories start from 250 words and can go up to 750 words. This is striking as the newspaper acknowledges the lack of time and demographical features of its readers. As the target audience is between the ages of 18-30, who rarely have time to read a newspaper, the story length is rarely above 500 words. Most of the stories are straight news stories, a few are interpretative. The reader is no nonsense reader- wants to read the news and make his/her own opinions.

Very rarely, yes it is shocking; one finds a sensational treatment of the story. Most news items are consciously balanced and sober, with an attempt made to get both sides of the issue. The criticism that TOI is sensational, to the point of being a tabloid, is unfounded. The newspaper has undertaken a shift due to the negative image it carried among the average Bangaloreans. But it may also have something to do with keeping the main newspaper respectable in contrast to the *Bangalore Times* supplement.

Picture, they say is better than words, is given its importance on the front page. On an average two 3-column pictures are carried on the page with a descriptive caption and a heading. Again this dispels the notion that TOI indulges in sensationalism with big and graphic pictures. Finally, stories are also complemented with the help of graphics for ease in understanding. The colour, which adds to the presentation and appeal of the newspaper, is kept sober with the use of only a few dominating ones. The promo-boxes at the top set the colour agenda for the day by having two contrasting colour schemes.

Readership Survey

Around 250 subjects who read the TOI were questioned about their media consumption habit. Many are now getting their news first from the internet, followed by television. Newspaper is still read for the in-depth coverage of news and for their comments. This trend is indicative of the things to come- we are following in the footsteps of the West where internet is the basic source of news for the majority.

Half the number of TOI readers ranks their newspaper as being the best, while the other half feels that The Hindu, Deccan Herald or the New Indian Express is superior. Almost everyone however reads the TOI for its entertainment value. In other words, the image of the newspaper is youthful and the news and views are given in a more entertaining manner compared to other newspapers. This is the selling feature of TOI and the reason for it being so widely read among the youth.

The readers feel that the coverage of news is very good in the TOI. It not only gives what the readers want to read but gives it in a way that makes it easier and a pleasure to run through the pages of the newspaper. The use of colour and graphics brightens up the pages and at the same time brings interest to the otherwise boring details. The ease with which a reader travels through the pages of TOI is a testimony to the presentation of the various elements. The font is friendly and not intimidating. It drives home the point that TOI is reader-friendly and not a top-down imposition.

It is interesting to note that on a series of issues the average TOI reader is well acquainted. The coverage by TOI on issues like infrastructure (Metro Rail) has given a ray of hope to the otherwise hapless citizens of Bangalore. They feel that the problem can be surmounted as the government gets cracking on various infrastructure fronts. The perception that the issue is important and that there is a solution round the corner is an outcome of the way TOI has dealt with the same.

Similar outcomes can be drawn from the answers to the other questions that the respondents have given. The adequate coverage of the annual IIM placements gives the readers a feeling that IIM students have benefited from the globalisation that is sweeping the country. The reservation issue that rocked the nation put the IIMs on the front page of TOI. The image of the institution came through unscathed and a record number of students attempted the CAT exams.

The reality in the minds of TOI readers has a direct link to the issues put on the front page and the intensity with which the issue was pursued. For example, most of the readers felt that the change in government in Karnataka was stage-managed and the dramatic refusal of prime ministership by Sonia Gandhi had enhanced her stature in the eyes of the public.

Similarly, the impact of Bollywood on the youth is quite striking. The more than adequate coverage of Mumbai film world by TOI and the ease with which entertainment news from Hindi cinema finds a place on the front page has led to the perception that people are affected by the persona of their stars. They feel that fashion is dictated by the film stars and the youth lap-up the fashion statements of their role-models.

The Conclusions Drawn

Taking the two- content analysis and readership survey- together one can come to the following conclusions.

1. The influence of a newspaper in the lives of the young is coming down. With the advent of 24 hour news channel and the internet the youth is getting primary information from them as apposed to the newspaper. But the understanding of an issue is more from the newspaper reporting as the details and comments add to the influence. The detailed and often campaign-like reporting on issues like Bangalore infrastructure have generated a perception among the TOI readers that it is important and must for their survival.
2. Newspapers are moving away from mere political reporting to covering all possible issues. This shift is more evident in TOI as it targets the youth. The readers want entertainment (news about celebrities), sports and crime news. Therefore on the front page of Times one rarely finds political news hogging the limelight. Even the treatment of the news, if it is political, is different and takes into consideration the impact on the readers. The interesting way in which political news is presented (some may say sensational) goes down well with a readership that views politics as a waste of their time.
3. The charge that TOI is sensational and therefore trivialises important issues is not borne out in the study. The headline is a strong indication of the tone of the newspaper. What one sees is a mix of headline types- from Banner headlines for important stories to single column ones for the not so important. The language is also formal in most cases except for a penchant for punning in some cases. The Times on the other hand has the distinction of being in the forefront when it comes to taking up causes- be it the loss of green cover with relation to Cubbon Park, keeping the elected local representatives on their toes by focusing on their constituencies and so on. One more reason why the young are fond of TOI.
4. By using the stories reported by their own correspondents, TOI is sending a strong message that it wants the readers to get the story from the perspective of

the newspaper. It means that the selection process is in place to get the readers what TOI thinks is important for them and not some news agency that caters to a varied readership. There is a strong case for newspaper's own reporters to get the news if one needs to establish a rapport with the readers and get their confidence. It in turn adds to the credibility of the newspaper among the readers and subsequently the influence it has on them.

5. Brevity is the soul of wit is taken to a different level by TOI. The news stories on the front page never exceed 750 words, averaging about 500 words. This is keeping with the needs of the younger readers who have little patience for lengthy normative reports. They want it straight, with no comments or views. We give the news (facts) and the readers interpret it, seems to be the policy of the newspaper.
6. There is an attempt to give a balanced report by making every effort to give both sides of a story. One side may get perceived as having more elements than the other due to the dynamics of reporting. Sources for the other side are reluctant to speak, fearing adverse publicity and are thus unavailable for comment. By putting charges in quotes an attempt is made to deflate the charge of sensationalism. Most readers don't find the front page of TOI less sober or credible due to the different ways of handling the stories. In fact it is one feature that adds to the readership.
7. The pictures used also add to the influence of TOI. By including a graphical element to back the facts, the newspaper is reinforcing the story in the minds of the readers. A photograph that is apt and comes with an explanatory caption is likely to stay in the minds of the readers. As stories are not lengthy, there is more space for giving more photos on the front page. In addition to the pictures, TOI is a pioneer in using additional graphical devices to get the point across to the readers in an easy and understandable manner. The ease with which a reader travels across the page is the result of all the features mentioned above being in the right proportion.
8. The influence TOI has on its readers is maximum when it comes to news on entertainment. Bollywood news is very popular with the young readers as it provides for light reading- 'time pass' for many. Not many take the news seriously but read it for pure entertainment value. The perception that Times gives too much space to light, entertaining news is not supported by evidence. What is true is that it is given due importance in the scheme of things, which includes a wide variety of topics ranging from politics, civic, crime, sports and others.

9. Brand TOI has created a sensation. It has achieved a phenomenal growth in the last decade. This is due to a wide variety of reasons- keeping a check on price, targeting the young with their kind of stories, contemporary way of presenting the news and colour. The issue of colour is much debated in the context of newspapers. It was considered a crime to bring out a newspaper in colour. But after Times introduced colour to newspapers, all the rest followed suit. It is one feature that drives home the point that the world around is colourful and not black and white.
10. The agenda of the newspaper is clear in its choice of stories, the perspective it gives to them and the way they are presented. Whether the agenda has an impact on the readers is difficult to measure. But by looking at all the possible areas (one could think of) of influence one can draw the conclusion that readers of TOI are indeed influenced by what they come across on the front page. It is clear that the perception that the readers have about the world around them is to a larger extent, if not all, due to the media that they consume. Among the young readers in the age group of 18-21, the perception is created due to the consumption of The Time of India.

Future Research Areas

It would be interesting to research whether television news is having an impact on perception due to its increasing reach, especially among the young college students of Bangalore. Also, with the kind of reach among the youth and varied features that internet has, it would be interesting to know if they are influenced by the new media and in what possible ways. But that is for another day.

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Questionnaire Used for the Readership Survey

Please fill the following questionnaire as your views are vital for the success of this research. Just tick the option you agree with and specify in case of any others. The information provided is only for the purpose of research. Thank you for your time and inputs. CS refers to Can't Say.

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Religion: Hindu/Muslim/Christian/others (specify)
4. Family Income: 5000-10000, 10,000-20000, 20000-30000, above 30000
5. Gender: Male/Female
6. City of Origin:
7. Present education status: BA/BCom/BSc/BBM/others (specify)
8. Basic source of information: TV/Internet/Newspaper/others (specify)
9. How many years reading The Times of India: <1, 1-2, 2-3, >3
10. Reason(s) for reading: Availability/Coverage/Youthful/any other (specify)
11. What type of news appeals to you: Sports/Business/Politics/Entertainment/others (specify)
12. How is the news covered in TOI: Adequate/Average/Poor
13. Do you feel Metro Rail will solve transport problems of Bangalore: Yes/No/CS

14. Can the proposed change in the Criminal law help in ensuring speedy justice:
Yes/No/CS
15. Is it the right time to buy pre-owned/used cars: Yes/No/CS
16. Has India gained from the visit of President Bush: Yes/No/CS
17. More Indians in the Billionaire's list means India is prospering economically:
Yes/No/CS
18. Poor infrastructure will pose a real threat to Bangalore's industrial future:
Yes/No/CS
19. IIM-B graduate salary has hit a all time high due to: Image/Talent/Globalization/
others
20. Has the threat to life and property increased due to Varanasi bomb blasts:
Yes/No/CS
21. Was the change in government in Karnataka staged: Yes/No/CS
22. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi's stature has gone up due to her resignation: Yes/No/CS
23. Bollywood has an immense impact on the average Indian in terms of demeanour
and style of dressing: Agree/Disagree/No Opinion
24. Rank the following newspapers in terms of importance: Deccan Herald, The
Times of India, The New Indian Express, The Hindu and Vijay Times
25. Does TOI provide adequate photos and graphic details: Yes/No/CS

Please feel free to add anything you would like to say about the Times of India.

The Coding Sheet for the Content Analysis

Content Analysis Coding Schedule

Newspaper: The front page of **The Times of India**

Date-Month-Year:

Item Selected:

1. News Story
2. Cartoon
3. Picture
4. Polls

Location on the Page:

1. Lead
2. Second Lead
3. Anchor
4. Others

Type of Article/Item:

- | | |
|--------------|-------------------|
| 1. Political | 5. Infrastructure |
| 2. Business | 6. Accident |
| 3. Sports | 7. Entertainment |
| 4. Crime | 8. Others |

Kind of Headline:

1. Single Line
2. Double Line
3. Multiple Line
4. Banner

Place of Origin of Story/Item:

1. Local
2. Regional
3. National
4. International

Size of the Headline:

1. Single Column
2. Double Column
3. Multiple Column (3-5)
4. Six Column
5. Seven Column

Source of Story/Item:

1. Own Reporter/Correspondent
2. News Agency
3. Others

Second Headline:

1. Above
2. Below

Length of Article: (no. of words)

Type of Story Structure:

1. Straight News Story
2. Feature
3. Interpretative
4. Others

Treatment of Item:

1. Sober
2. Sensational
3. Balanced
4. One- sided

Picture:

Size Of the item:

1. Single Column
2. Double Column
3. Multiple Column

Graphics:

Kind of Caption:

1. Informative
2. Speculative
3. Comment