

Minority Media and Community Agenda Setting A Study On Muslim Press In Kerala

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Abstract

Unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the country, Muslim newspapers in Kerala are highly professional in staffing, payment, and news management and production technology and they enjoy 35 percent of the newspaper readership in Kerala. They are published in Malayalam when Indian Muslim Press outside Kerala concentrates on Urdu journalism. And, most of these newspapers have a promising newsroom diversity employing Muslim and non-Muslim women, Dalits and professionals from minority and majority religions.

However, how effective are these newspapers in forming public opinion among community members and setting agendas for community issues in public sphere? The study, which is centered on this fundamental question and based on the conceptual framework of agenda setting theory and functional perspective of minority media, examines the role of Muslim newspapers in Kerala in forming a politically vibrant, progress oriented, Muslim community in Kerala, bringing a collective Muslim public opinion into being, Influencing non-Muslim media programming on Muslim issues and influencing the policy agenda of the Government on Muslim issues.

The results provide empirical evidences to support the fact that news selection and presentation preferences and strategies of Muslim newspapers in Kerala are in line with Muslim communities' news consumption pattern and related dynamics. Similarly, Muslim public's perception of community issues are formed in accordance with the news framing and priming by Muslim newspapers in Kerala. The findings trigger more justifications for micro level analysis of the functioning of the Muslim press in Kerala to explore the community variable in agenda setting schema and the significance of minority press in democratic political context.

Keywords: Agenda-setting function, Minority Press, Indian Media, Indian Muslims, Functional Perspective of Minority Media

BACKGROUND

Muslims of Kerala has a long and rich legacy as mainstream mass media players in colonial and post-colonial settings with indubitable role in cultural construction, and public and policy agenda-setting in the region. At present, Muslim media organizations in Kerala run six successful newspapers with millions of copies, and dozens of Indian and international editions, claiming 35 percent share of total Malayalam newspaper audience crossing over religious and cultural boundaries.

The Chandrika daily, first Muslim full-fledged newspaper of Kerala is now 80 years old and *the Madhyamam daily*, which crossed 25 years now, is the first international newspaper from India with multi-edition presence in seven nations. With its active presence among Indian diaspora in the Middle East, the *Madhyamam daily* has been emerged as the most circulated non- Arab newspaper in the entire Arab world and the third largest circulated newspaper in Kerala. The recently launched *Suprabhadam daily* entered the field in 2014 with an initial circulation of half a million copies, a record in the history of newspapers, especially at a time when newspapers retreat from the field across the globe, due to the invasion of digital media. The other newspapers *Thejas*, *Varthamanam* and *Siraj* also have pressing presence in Malayalam newspaper sector.

Unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the country, these newspapers are highly professional in staffing, payment, and news management and production technology. They are published in Malayalam when Indian Muslim Press outside Kerala concentrates on Urdu journalism. And, most of these newspapers have a promising newsroom diversity employing Muslim and non-Muslim women, Dalits and professionals from minority and majority religions. Similarly, they have active cross media presence with satellite television channels like *Media One* of the *Madhyamam* daily and magazines of various kinds, publishing houses, and digital media presence through websites, news portals, e-newspapers, and mobile apps apart from independent digital production houses. In form and content parameters also, Muslim newspapers are on equal foot with their mainstream counterparts with adequate qualitative and quantitative representation of news and views on public issues and national and global affairs.

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MUSLIMS IN KERALA

The origin of Muslims in Kerala dates back to the time of the Prophet according to some historical accounts credited to Islamic scholars like Sulaiman Nadvi and Zain Uddin Al Makhtoum. Over centuries, Muslims, through their active presence in public sphere contributed richly to the development of Kerala culture and society and made their imprints in the making of free India even waging wars against the British. Malabar Mutiny of 1921, one of the first armed wars for free India was exclusively waged by Muslims of Malabar.

At present, Muslims constitute 23 percent of Kerala population and have very vibrant presence in trade, commerce, education, media, and politics. Muslims of Kerala has raised a unique political party called Muslims League which has 22 percent of representation in Kerala Legislative Assembly. It is also observed by historians that Islam arrived in Kerala through trade when it advanced to other parts of India through war and invasion. This peaceful beginning of Islam in this part of the country has led to greater assimilation of Kerala Muslim community to the native culture and society and thereby their rise as a matured secular society. About 96 percent of the Muslims in Kerala belong to Sunni stream though they are branched out to various sub sects on political and theological lines.

Political representation, migration to the Middle East and consequent inflow of foreign money, high performance in secular education, streamlined religious education system and greater assimilation with local mainstream culture helped the Muslims of Kerala to start their own print, electronic and online media systems

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study unveils the empirical validity of agenda setting pattern in the context of minority press in Kerala The problem under study has a deep theoretical significance especially in the present day socio cultural and political context of India where Muslims are being politically marginalized even though they are supposed to have enough potential to redefine the fate of the largest democracy in the world. More so, in communication perspective too, the theme

assumes significant since the most of “studies of minority media typically ascribe them as ‘radical’ or ‘alternative’ to the mainstream media”, (Shahin, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is based on two theoretical concepts. The first one is the agenda setting schema which depicts the relationships among the mass media agenda and public agenda and the second is the Viswanath and Arora’s conceptualization of Minority Media Functions.

AGENDA SETTING SCHEMA proposes that mass media influences public perception about the significance of the social issues and realities by prioritizing certain issues and realities over others giving more space and focus. The level of public understanding of social realities is considered to be the most important parameter to determine the influence of the media in a society (Ben Bagdikian, 985). Similarly media also set their news programme priorities on the basis of the information seeking behavior and information needs of the society.

In short, there is a reciprocity between people's agenda of information seeking and media agenda of information delivery, particularly because of the socioeconomic dynamics of the market and the public sphere. However this relationship cannot be considered as a perennial one, taking place in every context. Rather many intervening variables influence the pattern of this mutual influence. Of these variables, community/race is of paramount significance.

FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF MINORITY MEDIA developed by Viswanath and Arora, is the second base of this study. It is a conceptualizations related to the mass media audience motives. Five functions identified by Viswanath and Arora (2000) are considered to be the basis for exploring the motives of minority audience referred to in this study. Following are the five functions of minority press envisaged by Viswanath and Arora (2000):

1. Informational
2. Cultural Transmission
3. Community Booster
4. Sentinel function (Warning against threats to the community)
5. Assimilation function

The prime function is informational which emphasizes on providing information on the community with a stress on the developments taking place in various geographical areas and contexts ranging from local to global. As part of their cultural transmission function, minority press covers cultural elements pertaining to the particular community like festivals, ceremonies and other community events in addition to intimate ethnic facets which are to be revived or preserved and transmitted from generation to generations. Yet another role of www.ijellh.com

minority press is to function as a community booster providing inspiration to be the part of the community creating positive mindset towards the community. As part of this function, minority press tends to cover such boosting elements such as individual or collective achievements, positive responses from mainstreamed sections and the governments and the like. The intensity of the sentinel function depends on the social context where the press functions and the social status of the readers. The more aggressive are the majorities responses of social behaviors to the community the more intensified is the sentinel function of the community media. Assimilation function signifies the tendency of the community to assimilate itself to the local traditional systems of life or the mainstreamed way of life.

Again, while analysis the press in minority communities, Viswanath and Arora (2000) put forward two critical arguments: They indicate that the complexity and heterogeneity within the minority arguing that this will increase on the basis of various factors such as ethnicity, class, occupation, mother tongue etc. Similarly, they argue that minority press functions as an agency of social control.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The influence of news programming and prioritization on public perception of social realities has been studied widely though most of them are set against the Western media scape. It is commonly defined as the influence that the news agendas of different news organizations have on each other (Roberts & McCombs, 1994.). A medium, because of its elite leadership status and the pervasive norms of professional journalism, may affect the agenda of other media (McCombs, 2005). Started in 1920s, Agenda setting research witnessed a sea change with the publication of McComb and Shaw's study in 1972 which deals with the reciprocity between the public agenda and news preference of mass media. They provided empirical evidences to support the conceptualizations of the agenda setting scheme which has been under discussion for decades.

In 1980, the agenda setting research entered the new phase with the follow up works of McComb along with Weaver in 1983 which sought to investigate the contingent conditions which could redefine the agenda setting function. Their study also focused on the concept of need for orientation. Similarly, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory set yet another turning point in agenda setting studies. Weaver suggested that newspapers did not reflect reality, rather they form and frame realities and the order of preference given by the media to each issue items prompts people to perceive the significant of issues at their hand.

Scholars have examined, for example, how newspapers, magazines, and television networks affect each other's agenda (Golan, 2006), the influence of political Advertisements on newspapers' agenda (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennonet, 1998) and on the news agenda of television networks. Many recent studies explored the impact of online media on the agenda of traditional media (Delwiche, 2005; Lee, Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005; Li, Xuan, & Kluver, 2003). Lazarsfeld et al (1948) proposed that media messages helped reinforce existing beliefs rather than totally replacing with new beliefs.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To find out the news programming preference of Muslim media in Kerala
2. To find out the relationship between community news agenda of Muslim newspapers in Kerala and their readership
3. To analyze the salience of community news agenda issues as perceived by Muslim readers of newspapers.
4. To find out the level of associations of community media agenda with Muslim readers' perceived salience of them and the public agenda.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Going through the agenda setting studies, we can understand that methodologies used by each researcher differ from that of others given the social context, variables selected and objectives and hypotheses set. It means, agendas setting schema is flexible to adopt multiple techniques to analyzing the relationships among the variables. However, most of the studies used a mixed methodology of content analysis and survey - the former to gauge the programming preferences of newspapers and the latter to understand the perceived importance attached by the readership to media agenda.

This strategy is used by many researchers in a step by step procedure. In this study also the same method is used. The researcher analyzed the content of four newspapers under the study and prepared a list of news issues, then a survey questionnaire was prepared incorporating this list and asked the respondents to identify the issues they read and rank them in the order of each issue on the basis of the salience they attach to each issue.

Thus the researcher could arrive at the media agenda through content analysis and public agenda through survey since public agenda is constituted by the readers' perceived salience to each issue. Following this, the researcher matched the components, such as media agenda, readership of items and public agenda to determine the associations between them.

CONTENT ANALYSIS, CODING AND RELIABILITY

As 'content analysis is scientific technique for the objective, and systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content' objectivity was ensured through validity and reliability tests of the inter-coded data which was collected using the approved methods of randomization specifically following the quantitative techniques in research. Community news content of the sampled newspapers published between January 10 and 14, 2014 were analyzed categorizing the content into five thematic categories on the basis of prime functions of each content.

To identify the functional categories of content of each newspaper, two coders were employed and the inter coder reliability Inter coder reliability is checked using Cohe's kappa test. Inter-coder reliability was measured on a 10 percent of the content sample and found that the reliability among all the variables on average was 95 percent. The rate of agreement on individual variables ranging from 92 to 97. Cohe's kappa was .86 rading from .68 to .100 for all variable. The coded data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Reliability Coefficients of the newspapers are as follows: Madhyamam (0.96), Chandrika (.92), Siraj (.93) and Thejas (0.92).

SAMPLED NEWSPAPERS

At present there are six full-fledged newspapers in Malayalam published by Muslim community and all of them come under the purview of the definition of Muslim newspapers since they are initiated by Muslim collectives as nonprofit ventures raising funds from the community itself and to loud the issues concerned to community. Around 35 percent of the total readership of the Malayalam newspapers belong to the Muslim press according to the cumulative account of the copies of all the newspapers in the State as revealed by the Audit Bureau of Circulations 2014 report. The newspapers run by Muslim community are Madhyamam Daily, Chandrika daily, Siraj Daily, Thejas Daily, Varthamanan Daily and Suprabhadham Daily. Among these, Suprabhatham is the youngest with its entry in 2014 and Chandrika Daily is the eldest started in 1934. Of these, six dailies, four- namely Madhyamam, Chandrika, Siraj and Thejas were selected for study. Suprabhatham and Varthamanan are excluded since the former is still in its infancy and the latter is not much circulated and faces abrupt stoppage of publication.

PROFILE OF SAMPLED DAILIES

Madhyamam is the largest circulated Muslim newspaper with Indian and International editions and a circulation of nine lakh copies on average. Started in 1987, by Ideal Publication Trust, Kozhikode, which is associated with *Jama at e Islami* Hind, Kerala www.ijellh.com

Chapter, is considered to have a rich news room diversity in terms of multicultural staffing and content selection. The *Madhyaamam Group* that runs the daily has started Media One Television and owns many publishing and production houses directly or indirectly.

Chandrika was started 1934 in Thalassery, once known as the capital of enlightened Kerala Muslims, by a group of Muslim intelligentsia belonging to Muslim League aiming at cultural and social progress of the community in the colonial India through hrough Indian Union Mulsim League. Chandrika earned a long and honorable legacy of catalyzing the cultural milieu of Kerala through its political and social involvement and literary initiatives. Headquartered in Kozhikode, Chandrika has also multiple editions in India and abroad and publishes an array of sister publication though its circulation is limited to 1.3 lakhs.

Siraj Daily is started by Thoufeeq Publications at Kozhikode belong to the Sunni Section of Muslims under the leadership of A.P. Aboobaker Musliar. The focus of the daily is their fraction and its activities though it covers national and international issues. Circulation is below one lakh copies.

Started in 1996 by Inter Media group, *Thejas* daily aims at catering to the media needs of Popular Front of India, formerly known as National Development Front and its political wing Social Democratic Party of India. Like other three newspapers, *Thejas* has also editions in India and abroad. Its circulation is less than one lakh copies.

All these newspapers are headquartered in Kozhikode, the capital of Malabar Muslims and attached to various ideologies within the Islamic community in the State. Interestingly these newspapers claim to have staff members from various communities and have state of the art production facilities. All of them have active online presence through sophisticated interactive websites.

SAMPLE SURVEY

The data on the public agenda was elicited through a questionnaire administered to a sample of 320. Readers belonging to Muslim community. The sample was derived on randomization method using the subscriber lists of each newspaper. The lists were collected from the respective agents in four areas of Malappuram district, the only Muslim dominated districts in Kerala and a place where these newspapers are read widely. 80 questionnaires were distributed to the subscribers of each daily, but the number of fully completed and returned are Madhyamam (68), Chandrika (62) Siraj (70) and Thejas(72) and the total sample size is 272 with a response rate of 85 percent.

RESULTS

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Given in ensuing parts are the results of content analysis of the community issues published in the sampled dailies during the study period.

GENERIC CATEGORIES OF COMMUNITY RELATED CONTENT

Content related to community matters are classified into three such news, features and column. This was done to find out how items are featured and treated in the newspapers.

Table 1: Generic Categories of Content in Sampled Dailies

Content Typology	Newspapers			
	<i>Madhyamam</i>	<i>Chandrika</i>	<i>Siraj</i>	<i>Thejas</i>
News	64	69	61	69
Features	28	4	3	4
Columns	8	27	36	27
Total	100	100	100	100

As per the data in Table 1, all the newspaper under study dedicate lion share of their community related content to news items. There is a no signification difference among the newspaper in this practice.

However, there is significant difference among the newspaper in terms of the distribution of features and columns. While Siraj, Thejas and Chandrika dedicate more space to colmn genre on community issues, the share of Madhayamam is limited to 8 percent.

FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES OF CONTENT

To determine the media agenda of Muslims newspapers under study, content of the newspapers were categorized into five functional categories as envisaged in the conceptualizations of Viswanath and Arora (200). Thus the content categories are generated as

1. Information content (content that caters to information needs of readers interested in community affairs)
2. Cultural content (which is centered on the festival, celebrations, other cultural events of community)
3. Community booster content (content meant to motivate the community to defend itself and or to excel in various domain)
4. Sentinel function content (content that warns the community members of keeping vigilant against the possible threats of various kind)

5. Assimilation function content (content that motivates or inspires the members to mingle with local culture or community)

Table 2 : Functional Categories of Content

Issue Categories	<i>Madhyamam</i>	<i>Chandrika</i>	<i>Siraj</i>	<i>Thejas</i>
	N = 7064	N = 8096	N = 9061	N = 7890
	col. cm	col. Cm	col. cm	col. cm
	% of space	% of space	% of space	% of space
Informational	49	34	35	37
Cultural Content	23	20	29	16
Community Booster Content	8	21	15	24
Sentinel Function	12	16	14	19
Assimilation Function	8	9	7	4
Total	100	100	100	100

Table 2 details the content category preference of the newspapers under study. It is evident from the data that all the newspapers give greater importance to informational content. Of these, Madhyamam is seen to focus more on informational content. Second largest segment is cultural content. In this case Siraj comes first, followed by Madhyamam, Chandrika and Thejas respectively. Community booster content is more in Thejas daily, followed by Chandrika, Siraj and Madhyamam respectively. Sentinel function content also presents the same trend with Thejas outweighing others. However, Chandrika and Madhyamam and Siraj has higher percent of assimilation function content while Thejas lagging far behind with 4 percent.

MEDIA AGENDA AND COMMUNITY AGENDA

Table 3: Pearson Correlation of News Agenda Saliene in correlation with Readership Score and Muslim Readers' Perceived Importance - *Madhyamam Daily*

Variables	Media's News Item Importance (Pearson r)	Readership Scores of News Items (Pearson r)	Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (Pearson r)
Media's News Item Importance (N = 47)	1.000	.398**	.466**
Readership Scores of News Items (N = 47)	.398**	1.000	.868**
Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (N = 47)	.466**	.868**	1000

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1- tailed)

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Madhyamam daily's news agenda and Muslim Readers' ranking of issues is .466 and its significant ad 0.01 level indicating that news agenda influence the Muslim readers' agenda of perceiving the salience of issues. Similarly, the correlation between readership score of news items and Muslim readers' ranking of issues (.868) shows that there is a significant association between these two variables at 0.01 level.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation of News Agenda Saliene in correlation with Readership Score and Muslim Readers' Perceived Importance - *Chandrika Daily*

Variables	Media's News Item Importance (Pearson r)	Readership Scores of News Items (Pearson r)	Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (Pearson r)
Media's News Item Importance (N = 69)	1.000	.382**	.795**
Readership Scores of News Items (N = 69)	.382**	1.000	.692**
Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (N = 69)	.795**	.692**	1000

*** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1- tailed)*

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Chandrika daily's news agenda and Muslim Readers' ranking of issues is .795 and its significant at 0.01 level indicating that news agenda influence the Muslim readers' agenda of perceiving the salience of issues. Similarly, the correlation between readership score of news items and Muslim readers' ranking of issues (.692) shows that there is a significant association between these two variables at 0.01 level.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation of News Agenda Salience in correlation with Readership Score and Muslim Readers' Perceived Importance – *Siraj Daily*

Variables	Media's News Item Importance (Pearson <i>r</i>)	Readership Scores of News Items (Pearson <i>r</i>)	Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (Pearson <i>r</i>)
Media's News Item Importance (N = 71)	1.000	.425**	.496**
Readership Scores of News Items (N = 71)	.452**	1.000	.794**
Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (N = 71)	.496**	.794**	1.000

*** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1- tailed)*

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Siraj daily's Media agenda and Muslim Readers' ranking of issues is .496 and its significant at 0.01 level indicating that news agenda influence the Muslim readers' agenda of perceiving the salience of issues. Similarly, the correlation between readership score of news items and Muslim readers' ranking of issues (.794) shows that there is a significant association between these two variables at 0.01 level.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation of News Agenda Salience in correlation with Readership Score and Muslim Readers' Perceived Importance – *Thejas Daily*

Variables	Media's News Item Importance	Readership Scores of News Items	Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues

Media's News Item Importance (N = 53)	1.000	.425**	.369**
Readership Scores of News Items (N = 53)	.425**	1.000	.762**
Muslim Readers' Ranking of Issues (N = 43)	.369**	.762**	1000

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1- tailed)

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Thejas daily's news agenda and Muslim Readers' ranking of issues is .369 and its significant ad 0.01 level indicating that news agenda influence the Muslim readers' agenda of perceiving the salience of issues. Similarly, the correlation between readership score of news items and Muslim readers' ranking of issues (.762) shows that there is a significant association between these two variables at 0.01 level.

While going through the data in Tables 3 to 7 which deal with correlation coefficient of news agenda salience with readership score and readers' perceived importance, it is evident that the correlation among the media agenda, readership score and readers' ranking of issues are significant at 0.01 level.

DISCUSSION

The study sought to find out how Muslim newspapers in Kerala set their news agenda related to Muslim community issues, against the background of the five functions supposed to be performed by the minority press elsewhere as envisaged by Viswanath and Arora. At the same time, the study attempted to measure the association between the news agenda of Muslims newspapers and the news preference of their readers from Muslim community. The third objective of the study is to find out the correlation between the news agenda and public agendas, which means whether the news programming pattern of Muslim newspaper have any influence on the ranking of Muslim issues by readers from that community.

Majority of the agenda setting studies are set against the western media environment. Only a few works have studied the Indian experience of agenda setting of the press. And, studies on the agenda setting functions of minority press in Indian context is hard to find. In that respect, the present attempt is worth mentioning since it gives first impressions of the performance of the minority press in India, taking the vibrant Muslim media landscape in Kerala as a case.

The results related to the distribution of community related content categories imply that all the newspapers are following the same pattern of content preference, framing and priming despite the scuttle differences.

Similarly, functional categorization and resultant analysis of the community related content indicate that the most primed function is informational. At the same time, community booster and sentinel functions are also top on the agenda of the Muslim newspapers in Kerala.

Most important aspect of the findings is the heavy influence that Muslim media have on the Muslim reader's perceived significance of the community related issues. It means the media and their audience are moving on the same line. From the findings, it can be assumed that newspapers are the significant predictor for the Muslim community to determine what to think about.

In short, the issue has a deeper theoretical value in terms of positing community as a variable in agenda setting studies in India context and for studying the role of Minority press in a democratic political system.

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