

# ICT Infrastructure Development and Regional News Television: A Study of the Smart City Kochi (SCK) Project

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## **Abstract**

Infrastructure development constitutes one of the key requisites of development. Developing economies which embrace the globalisation process have to build physical infrastructure to catalyse manufacturing, production and exports. Information and Communication Technology products and solutions also require infrastructure to grow and flourish. Many Indian states including Kerala have identified the potential of ICTs and efforts have been made to develop adequate infrastructure. The success of these efforts lies in factors such as good governance, appropriate legal framework, flow of private capital and a favourable public opinion. This study analysed the public perception about the issues and factors associated with the Smart City Kochi (SCK), an IT infrastructure project in Kerala and its television coverage. Triangulation method was employed in this study which included a survey revealing the gaps in TV coverage of SCK and found insignificant influence of it in building public perception.

## **Keywords**

Infrastructure Development, ICT, Smart City Kochi, Malayalam TV News, Development Reporting

## **Introduction**

ICTs have emerged as an indispensable instrument in economic growth and development of a country and its people. It has elevated its stance from an enabler to a key player in modern development strategies. A quarter century long economic reforms in India have generated considerable wealth from ICTs and allied sectors with the help of young, educated population and appropriate policy framework. Although governments view ICT networks as prerequisite for investment, growth and economic development, Rice (2009) cautioned that political freedom, transparency and protection of property rights are central to technological transfer, diffusion and innovation in a country. Since 90's India had leapfrogged to global IT map by setting up software parks in many cities such as Hyderabad

and Bangalore and reaped the benefits of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) of companies in developed countries. The first software park in India, Technopark, was started in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala in 1991. However, even with an advantage of early start in electronics<sup>8</sup> and IT development the state could not make much headway in this emerging sector. In 2014, the Kerala's share of the total software exports<sup>9</sup> of the country stood at a meagre 2.02% whereas the neighbouring Karnataka state could garner 39.58%.

Factors such as administrative inefficiency, lack of atmosphere for investments and ease of doing business, high cost of labour, unfriendly policies etc. were attributed to the lacuna in ICT development in Kerala. Sustained efforts have been made by successive governments to change the perception on investor friendliness of the state since 2001. The Global Investors Meet (GIM) at Kochi (January 18&19, 2003) organised by the Government of Kerala led by Chief Minister A.K. Antony was the first major initiative in this direction. Many projects of ICT, tourism and other service sector industries were showcased by private investors in the GIM. This event was a platform to identify the issues of development for the state as well as brainstorm ideas for moving forward.

The mass media discourses at that time critically scrutinised many projects and programmes mooted by the government as well as private agencies. A broad consensus among major political fronts seemed to emerge after these exchanges in Kerala. One aspect of the consensus was the impracticability of heavy industrialisation of the state due to environmental issues and high population density. ICT, Tourism and other service sector industries were identified as the best options for Kerala's growth in future. Some other aspects which contributed to the emergence of consensus were the availability of skilled human resources, dearth of public finances for development programmes, lesser displacement and minimum requirement of land for development. It was also pointed out that IT is bereft of pollution and it can offer a credible alternative for depleting opportunities abroad for migrants from the state.

The second IT Park of the state was established at Kakkanadu, Kochi in 2004 in this context. A Dubai based infrastructure development company; Tecom (Technology, Electronic, Commerce and Media Free Zone Ltd.) which had built Dubai Internet City (DIC) approached the Government of Kerala with a proposal to build an Internet City at Kochi in the same year. The project proposal was to set up an IT park in 336 acres of land (100 acres of Infopark+136 acres of additional land in Kakkanad village + 100 acres of lease land in Puthancruz village) in Kochi with 9% equity participation for the state government, which invites IT, ITeS and BPO companies to Kerala. As per the provisions of IT policy 2001 of the state government, the Smart City was expected to create 33,000 new jobs in 10 years as they were provided with 100 acres of land free of cost<sup>10</sup>. The IT infrastructure project was widely welcomed by all the stakeholders for various reasons. It was expected that the presence of an IT infrastructure major in the state would help in bringing investments and in an image makeover of the state as an investment destination. However, the project could commence only on February 24, 2011 and the delay of seven years cost Kerala losing the ground in IT development to other neighbouring states.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The Kerala State Electronics Development Corporation (KELTRON) which was set up in 1973 at Thiruvananthapuram started producing electronic hardware and equipments including TV sets in 1978 through village level women's co-operative societies.

<sup>9</sup> As per the data published by Electronics and Computer Software Export Promotion Council in 2014-15, India's software exports were worth 5,93,669 Rs. Cr. Karnataka state which topped in exports had a share of 2,35,000 Rs. Cr. Kerala's contribution was just 12,000 Rs. Cr.

<sup>10</sup> IT policy 2001. IT Department, Government of Kerala. The Govt. has introduced 'Kerala IT Industry Incentive Scheme' which stipulates the creation of 1000 IT jobs in 1 acre of allotted land.

The reasons for this delay and subsequent adverse impact, as earlier mentioned, were far too many. These included disagreement between the agency and the government on the terms and conditions such as the extent of land parcels of the project, the cost of land, assured number of jobs from the project, claim for Infopark, Kochi, equity participation of the government, SEZ status and free hold rights among others. In most cases, such issues surface at the formative stages of the project. However, in the case of Smart City, Kochi (SCK) the conditions and bargains put forth by the private agency were scrutinised through the prism of the 'interests of the state'. Questions such as to what extent a government can incentivise for private investments and what should be the ideal role of government in Private Public Partnership (PPP) projects also emerged. The central issue of 'installation of an IT infrastructure project' transformed itself into the issue of 'protecting the interest of the state in a capitalist environment'. It needs to be mentioned that these exchanges and shifts of goalposts did not happen due to the compulsions emanating from within the government structure but emerged from the public perceptions formed by mass media discourses on above mentioned issues.

The media diffusion in the state is much wider and deeper in comparison with other Indian states owing to high literacy and other historical reasons such as migration, public action and matriarchy (Jeffrey, 1992, 2000 and 2010). The ABC figures (2015) showed 64,88,094 (10.2% of the total circulation in India) as the circulation of all Malayalam publications which stood at third position in the country and 76.8% of the households in the state owned a television set. As per the statistics released by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, on June 31, 2016, the number of private satellite TV channels which had valid license in India was 890. Of these, 401 were news and current affairs channels and 489 were non-news channels revealing that, although the viewership share was less, 45.1% of the Indian satellite channels were engaged in news broadcasting. The FICCI-KPMG report (2015) showed that in 2014, the viewership share of the regional news and regional entertainment channels was 3.7% and 17.9%, respectively among all Indian channels. Mass Media in Kerala assumed a pivotal space in the exchange and analysis of information and synthesis of public perception and public opinion on issues related to SCK.

This study explored the coverage of Malayalam TV News Channels (Asianet News, Manorama News, Mathrubhumi News, Indiavision, Kairali People TV, Reporter TV and channels such as Media One TV, Jaihind TV, Kairali TV and Jeevan TV which telecast news and current affairs programmes) of SCK. Attempts were made to identify the features of coverage of SCK and related issues and analyse how the coverage was instrumental in creating public perception.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

Why is it relevant to study the public perception or opinion on a developmental issue in relation to policies of governments? And what is the role of mass media in creating public perception? These questions were investigated many a time and gave useful suggestions in policy formulations. For example, a study which spanned 12 long years have reaffirmed that policy making in American states had significant correlation with public opinion (Erikson, Wright and McIver, 1993). The symbiotic relation between media and policy was clearly enunciated by agenda setting theoreticians and they established that there was an indirect relationship between media agenda and policy agenda (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). With the proliferation of economic reforms and the subsequent media diffusion these findings have a bearing in the Indian context as well. The issue of positioning media in the development initiatives has become imperative due to a number of factors. Peripheral news gathering processes and over dependence on 'talking heads' are some of the criticisms

leveled against media in the recent past. Noisy debates which have not been yielding concrete guidelines for solutions and the profit maximisation tendencies which retard the objective journalism practices are also being criticised vehemently by many media experts.

Thus it was pertinent to probe the media agenda, public perception and policies and the interrelationship between these three facets through the prism of development communication and development journalism. The people centric-participatory communication ideas (Servaes 1986, Mody 1991, Melkote 2015) put forth by Devcom scholars have paved the way for the 'Communication for Development' (C4D) strategy by the UN which encompasses a comprehensive signpost for best practices in development journalism and communication. C4D rejects the top-down vertical models and prompts free expression of ideas of development by each individual. It also encourages critical scrutiny of development programmes which includes the estimation of side-effects of development such as environmental issues, displacement and adverse policies which threaten sustainable development.

The issues of infrastructure development have ramifications in the sustenance of gains achieved in the social sector development as well. In the light of this argument it was worthwhile to examine the SCK project. The media coverage of this project was hinged on several aspects such as policy issues, state's role, employment, rehabilitation and economic growth. It was therefore important to ascertain the public perception about the coverage of these issues to identify the gaps in coverage in Malayalam News Channels.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

The broad objective of the study was to identify and analyse the issues covered in the television coverage of SCK project and the role of coverage in creating public perception towards these issues.

The specific objectives were to:

- Identify the salient issues related to the SCK based on public perception;
  - Analyse the public perception about the coverage of SCK by Malayalam TV News Channels
- and
- Explore if there is any relationship between the television coverage of various issues related to SCK and the public perception.

Based on the objectives of the study, following hypotheses were formulated. These were:-

**H1.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the importance of the project for future IT development of the state;

**H2.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the terms and conditions of the project;

**H3.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the rehabilitation issues of the project;

and

**H4.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the elements of conflict in the project.

### Research Design

The research design of this paper comprised of detailed study and review of available TV programmes of Smart City Kochi, Indepth interviews with two experts<sup>12</sup> and a field survey of Ernakulam District. The quantitative analysis helped in triangulating the observations drawn from the qualitative study and indepth interviews. Two urban and two rural clusters were selected for identifying 320 respondents for the study who were exposed to the television coverage of SCK. Sample selection was done by using systematic random sampling method with due representation to various demographic indicators.

### Findings and Analysis

The research instrument prepared for the study enquired the rank order of SCK issues as perceived by the respondents and the agreement level towards separate statements framed on the basis of TV coverage of these issues. Personal details and media habits were also elicited from the respondents.

The profile of the respondents has been summarised in Table 1.0.

Category	Classifications	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	203	63.4
	Female	117	36.6
Age group	Young (18-35)	129	40.3
	Middle aged (36-55)	122	38.1
	Old (56 and above)	69	21.6
Area of Residence	Rural	154	48.1
	Urban	166	51.9
Extent of Media Use	Passive (Less than half an hour)	118	36.9
	Moderate (Between half an hour and one hour)	125	39.1
	Active (more than one hour)	77	24

The qualitative study and review of available TV programmes on SCK and indepth interviews with experts revealed the following issues/factors.

<sup>12</sup> Mr. Joseph C. Mathew, Commentator, writer and expert in IT sector and Mr. K.G.Krishnakumar, Principal Correspondent, *Manorama News*.

**1. Relevance of SCK:**

The presence of the promoters of SCK was believed to be an important factor in attracting IT majors to the state. The volume of the project and strategic advantage of Kochi were other aspects which were crucial in the IT development of the state. Thus the project was portrayed as an extremely important as well as relevant component of various development initiatives of Kerala in TV coverage.

**2. Land Issues:**

The transfer of land for the project was expected to be in lieu with the jobs that may be created from the project. This was a contentious issue among the promoter and the government and it was covered prominently in television coverage.

**3. Terms and Conditions:**

The agreement between the promoter and the government has stipulated certain terms and conditions such as job creation, transfer of land, monopoly rights for IT infrastructure development, equity participation etc. The negotiations based on these stipulations had significant impact on the policy formulation of the state. Naturally these conditions were widely reported in TV channels. The coverage was constructed within the framework of the 'interest of the state' and biased towards the versions of experts who were critical to both the government and the promoter.

**4. Rehabilitation:**

The rehabilitation package implemented among the 59 families of Edachira was praised in the media coverage as it included alternate land, newly constructed houses and subsistence allowance for a fixed period. Since rehabilitation issues are the major hurdle in the realisation of infrastructure projects in the state, this initiative was specifically highlighted and portrayed as a model which could be emulated elsewhere in the country.

**5. Disagreements and Controversies:**

The project was lagged for more than seven years due to disagreements between the promoter and the government. These disagreements were triggered after the eruption of controversies with regard to the terms and conditions which may be detrimental to the interest of the state according to a section of IT experts. TV news content reflected these aspects and the coverage fuelled the prevailing chaos.

**6. Employment:**

Since there is an abundant skilled and educated work force in Kerala, any development initiative which could generate employment was viewed enthusiastically by the general public. One of the reasons for high media attention to SCK was the expectation of jobs from the project.

**Salience of SCK Issues in Television Coverage:**

The respondents were asked to rank the issues/factors related to SCK according to their perception. The issue of land transfer received maximum attention among the viewers followed by rehabilitation issues and the terms and conditions for the project. Although the case study revealed a wider consensus on the relevance and potential of the project to create jobs and other opportunities, the factor was ranked as fifth by the respondents. The disputes

and disagreements among the stake holders surfaced through news conferences, interviews, special reports and debates in television coverage were viewed with least priority.

**Table 1.1 Rank order of issues/factors related to SCK N=320**

Issues/Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Land issues	2.72	1.416	1
Rehabilitation	3.10	1.704	2
Terms and Conditions	3.36	1.527	3
Employment	3.55	1.586	4
Relevance of the project	3.64	1.753	5
Disagreements and controversies	4.22	1.806	6

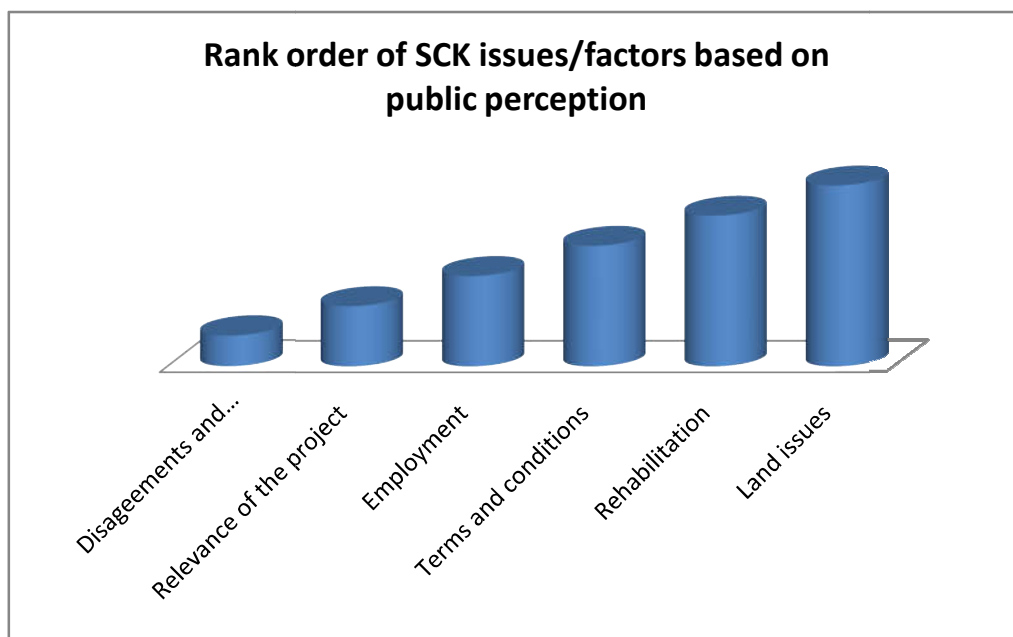


Fig 1: Rank order of SCK issues/factors

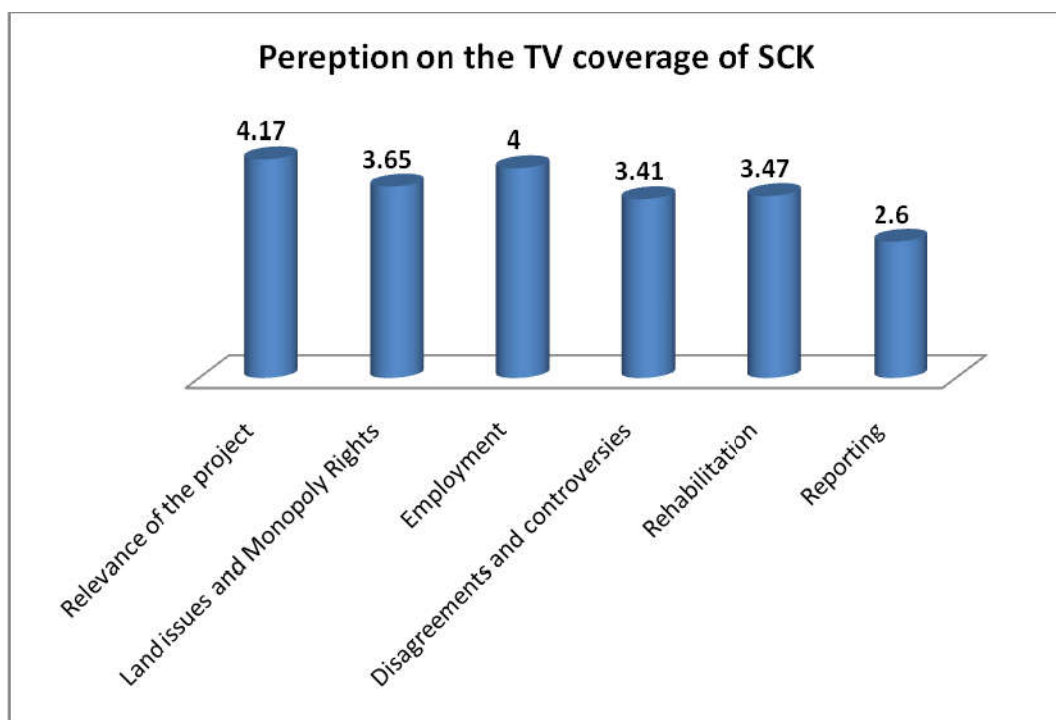
**Hierarchy of Issues/Factors Presented in the Television Coverage:**

The respondents were given six statements which sought the opinion about the Malayalam Television News Channel (MTNC) coverage of issues/factors related to SCK in a 5 point Likert scale. Table 1.2 showed the results.

**Table 1.2 Distribution of Respondents by the coverage of SCK; N=320**

Issues/Factors	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Relevance of the project	MTNCs presented the Smart City Project as an imperative for the overall development, particularly for the growth of IT sector in the state	4.17	.671

Land issues and Monopoly Rights	MTNCs opposed the terms and conditions in the agreement which gave away huge benefits such as monopoly in future IT development projects and large stretch of land to the agency.	3.65	.836
Employment	MTNCs have persuaded the agency and the Government to create maximum number of jobs in the project	4.00	.855
Disagreements and controversies	MTNCs were more interested in the disagreements between the agency and the Government	3.41	1.001
Rehabilitation	MTNCs reported the issues of rehabilitation of the residents in the project site with prominence	3.47	.880



The analysis showed the following.

- All the respondents agreed that the TV news channels covered the project as one of the most important initiative for the overall development of the state (Mean = 4.17).
- The respondents agreed that the Malayalam News TV Content had opposed the terms and conditions in the agreement between the agency and the Government which gave away monopoly and vast area of land to the agency (Mean= 3.65).
- The respondents agreed that (Mean=4) Malayalam TV News Channels persuaded both the government and the agency to create maximum employment opportunities in SCK through a well defined agreement.
- The respondents were neutral (Mean= 3.41) on the statement that TV News channels were more interested in the disputes between the agency and the Government.



- The rehabilitation issues related to SCK were not prominently reported by the TV channels according to the respondents. However, they observed that the channels represented the issue. The mean value of this variable was more than neutral (Mean = 3.47).

### Testing of Hypotheses

- H1.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of SmartCity Kochi and the viewers' perception about the importance of the project for future IT development of the state.

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to determine the relationship between the variables 'Relevance of the project' and 'TV coverage on the relevance of the project'. The correlation was negative and statistically significant. Spearman's Rho  $\rho = -0.271$ ,  $p = 0$  (N=296). Hence it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the importance of the project for future IT development of the state. Thus hypothesis 1 (H1) was accepted.

- H2.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the terms and conditions of the project;

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to determine the relationship between the variables 'Land Issues' and 'TV coverage of land issues and monopoly rights'. The correlation was negative and statistically insignificant. Spearman's Rho  $\rho = -0.026$ ,  $p = 0.655$  (N=304). Similarly another test between the variables 'Land Issues' and 'Terms and Conditions' was run and the result obtained was statistically insignificant positive correlation. Spearman's Rho  $\rho = 0.034$ ,  $p = 0.556$  (N= 302). Hence it can be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the terms and conditions of the project. Thus hypothesis 2 (H2) was rejected.

- H3.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the rehabilitation issues of the project.

The results of the Spearman's rank-order correlation between the variables, 'Rehabilitation' and 'TV coverage of rehabilitation' was Spearman's Rho  $\rho = -0.105$ ,  $p = 0.066$  (N=305). The correlation was negative, but statistically insignificant. Hence it can be concluded that there is no significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the rehabilitation issues of the project. Thus hypothesis 3 (H3) was rejected.

- H4.** There is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the elements of conflict in the project.

The Spearman's rank-order correlation run to test H4 was between the variables 'Disagreements and Controversies' and the TV coverage of this aspect. Results were Spearman's Rho  $\rho = 0.205$ ,  $p = 0$  (N=288). There is a statistically significant positive correlation between the variables. Thus it can be stated that there is a significant relationship between the coverage of Smart City Kochi and the viewers' perception about the elements of conflict in the project. Thus hypothesis 4 (H4) was accepted.

### Conclusions

Kerala state has the highest population density in the country and it is an environmental 'hot spot'. Land constitutes the most priced commodity in the business

capital and the paucity of land is a common feature in setting up of any infrastructure development project across the state. All these aspects invite critical scrutiny of land use for any developmental or non- developmental schemes. The general public of the state expects optimal utilisation and maximum bargain of the government land allotted to private investors. In this backdrop, allegations of undue benefits to the SCK promoter in the form of land received more credibility and TV coverage on SCK was often revolved around this issue.

The study revealed that despite the significance of SCK project in the state; public at large viewed land issues as the most prominent aspect while approaching the project proposal. The 'terms and conditions' of the project such as creation of jobs in lieu with the allotted land, equity participation of the government, monopoly development rights of IT infrastructure in Kochi etc. were also evaluated in the public domain and people were not ready to yield to the demands raised by the promoter even when the project was considered as an imperative by IT experts. Here the 'interest of the state' was kept upfront than the interests of the developer by the people.

The TV coverage of land issues and other terms and conditions of the project were featured with more prominence than the installation of the project, according to this study. However, the viewers were not significantly influenced by the TV coverage on the issues to formulate their opinions. They might have shaped up their opinion from previous experiences, interpersonal communication channels or from other media outlets.

The rehabilitation issue of SCK was ranked second by the respondents. Although the number of affected people was less as compared to other infrastructure projects in the state, public at large considered this as an important issue. Since rehabilitation occupies higher order in the hierarchy of issues/aspect, it is to be noted that public at large are vigilant and responsive to such issues and they expect accountability from governments and agencies of development. The minimalistic approach on rehabilitation as exhibited in many Indian development projects earlier would not suffice to realise large scale projects. The neutral response to the TV coverage of rehabilitation issue and the results of negative correlation showed the insignificant role of Malayalam TV Channels in building perception among public in this regard.

There was high agreement among respondents with the TV coverage which highlighted the significance of SCK for future IT development of the state. However they found this aspect with lesser importance (Rank=5). The influence of TV coverage in building a favourable perception towards the project was not worth mentioning. The study revealed that a monolithic prescription of developmental ideas by agencies would not satisfy the public and there should be an efficient mechanism to spell out doubts and apprehensions of the people.

The disagreements between the stake holders of SCK and subsequent controversies occupied longer TV time than other issues. 'Conflict' is being viewed as an important element of news as it is expected to draw more audience. The least priority given to this issue as well as the neutral response to TV coverage which highlighted the conflicts in the project by the viewers disclosed the lack of judgment of news by Malayalam TV news channels. However, the respondents were influenced by the coverage of the elements of conflict in the project.

According to this study the role of TV news channels in infrastructure development is to be reinvented by critically studying the audience feedback. The pointers obtained from this study lead to the necessity of capacity building of TV journalists to make sense of the complex business models, global economic turbulence, local aspirations and developmental

options through the prism of ground realities. In the globalisation paradigm, reporting of development issues is not mere dissemination of versions of stake holders of development but providing critical analysis and interpretation of the available data for an informed citizenry.

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