

Pandemic Communication through Public Service Broadcasters: A Study on Strategies of COVID-19 Awareness Creation in Kerala

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Abstract

The world is still passing through the challenges of SARS CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic, and many health communication campaigns have been devised to create public awareness about preventive methods and curative strategies. Since mass media act as a bridge between the government and society, mediated campaigns have had a high potential to influence public health practices. The Public Service Broadcasters (PSB) in India provided extensive coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic via audio-visual means across various states. Regional news units of *Doordarshan (Public service Television)* and *AIR (Public service Radio)* in Kerala broadcast diverse content related to the pandemic. Expert interviews, daily briefings by authorities, interface/bites of doctors and health workers, public service announcements, special programs, animated series and short videos, special bulletins, live phone interactions with experts, ground reports, and celebrity endorsements were used to create awareness. A qualitative content study followed by an interview with experts has revealed that the momentum of campaigning could not be sustained after the initial phase of successful campaigning.

Keywords

Health Communication, Public Service Broadcasting, Pandemic communication, Break chain Campaign

Introduction

Mass media has a crucial role in the dissemination of health information. The awareness campaigns on health issues focused on propagating important

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messages to a large audience over time and making behavioural modifications in the respondents.

Kerala, the southernmost state in India, has successfully adopted many strategies to curb the spread of SARS Cov-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. In the initial phase of the outbreak, the state had received broad accomplishments in effectively managing the health crisis. Kerala's most significant advantage was its robust healthcare system and participatory mode of management and governance while handling the pandemic (Chathukulam, 2021). The socio-economic and educational status of the region provided many advantages compared with the rest of the country. As reported in many studies, the people in Kerala are having high health consciousness and the habit of consuming mass-mediated messages to gather relevant information on health care needs. Thus from traditional press conferences to mass campaigns, the state has adopted a well-thought-out communication strategy in reaching out to the public (Padmakumar, 2020).

The government had implemented specific campaigns to propagate the ideas of social distancing, hand sanitizing, mask-wearing, and avoiding social gatherings from the beginning of the pandemic. A series of messages were communicated through different mass media sources, social media platforms, and other official communication channels. *Break the Chain* was the most prominent campaign launched in January 2020 by the Department of health and family welfare and social security mission initiatives to spread awareness on personal hygiene to fight against the pandemic. A series of animated and graphical awareness videos were produced and disseminated through all the mainstream media platforms, magazines, and online media handles of traditional media (State Planning Board, 2021)

A sequence of concepts propagated as part of the *Break the chain campaign* and they were disseminated through different mass media and other communication methods like posters, field publicity, graphical representations in the streets, etc. The major ideas propagated were *Thuppalle Thottupokum* (to avoid spitting in public spaces), *Ente Karuthal Nadinuvendi* (behavioral change for Covid pandemic), *Karuthalekunnnavark Karuthekam* (to support the health workers of the state), *E onam Karuthalonam* (the need of vigilance in Onam celebrations), *Avar enth cheyyunnu* (special consideration to elderly people), and *Back to Basics* (need to focus on SMS – Sanitise, Mask wearing and Social Distancing). The importance of vaccination was also projected through different kinds of public service messages and advertisements with celebrity endorsements.

As the pandemic progressed, the health department launched a new campaign called *Be the Warrior* in September 2021 to fight against the third pandemic wave. The campaign reinforced to propagate the messages to fight against the latest pandemic variant by keeping social distancing, hand washing/sanitizing, mask-wearing, and taking two doses of vaccine to the public. Irrespective of the awareness videos and messages from the health department, private and public media houses took the initiative to produce and broadcast their special Covid awareness programs.

Awareness Programmes via PSBs

The public service broadcasters of the country have participated in this venture as a responsible and authoritative medium for disseminating information on the COVID-19 outbreak. Doordarshan and All India Radio (AIR) were actively involved in the Covid communication efforts of the governments through a wide variety of programs and regular updates of the news on and about the pandemic. They broadcasted a series of special programs on the pandemic rather than the regular news updates and awareness programs. The special programs and segments presented in Doordarshan on COVID-19 awareness included *Doctor's Speech*, *Arogyabharath (Live show)*, *Total Health*, *Corona Virus*, *Corona Warriors*, *Samvad discussion program*, *Corona Par Nazar*, *special COVID-19 composite news bulletins*, *info bytes*, *positive stories*, *testimonials*, *myth busters*, *fake news alerts*, *celebrity endorsements*, *audio promos*, *measures by center/states*; *MoHF/MHA advisors*, and *Public Service Announcements* including celebrities like Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan. All India Radio (AIR) also provided extensive coverage on COVID-19 through updated news bulletins, daily briefings of government authorities, expert talks, live phone-in programs with experts on people's queries, positive news, vox pops on quarantine experiences, myth busters, fake news alerts, ground reports, celebrity endorsements and public service messages in regular intervals.

DD Malayalam (*Doordarshan Malayalam Channel*) and AIR in Kerala (*Akashvani*) engaged eminent medical experts in the bulletins, and they were connected to the public through the live phone-in programs conducted as part of *Corona Jagratha* series. During the initial phase of the pandemic, the regional news unit of DD Malayalam included the participation of essential service personnel like doctors, health workers, police, and individual NGOs on the do's and don'ts regarding the pandemic. DD news broadcasted interface/bytes of experts and police as part of the awareness creation. The social media wing of DD Malayalam uploaded special programs and short videos from daily telecasts, which helped to reach more audiences. Both the

media have regularly communicated essential information on vaccination programs too.

DD Malayalam broadcasted studio-based special programs regarding the survival strategies from the beginning of the outbreak, namely *Athijeevanam*, *Sahajeevanam*, and *Munnottu*. A socially oriented live phone-in program on the channel called *Samoohyapadam* presented vital information regarding the pandemic through several special episodes. A live discussion program named *Varthamanakalam* also provided various aspects of the pandemic in several episodes.

The AIR in Kerala broadcasted a number of Covid-related special programs as part of the campaigning through both AM and FM transmission. A regular radio health program in Akashvani called *Arogyakeralam* communicated several important pieces of information till the beginning of the pandemic. Other programs like *Ayurarogyam*, *Prakashadahara*, and *Sayanthanam* featured a variety of aspects of the Covid outbreak. The FM broadcasting section of AIR Thiruvananthapuram called *Ananthapuri FM* also marked its substantial presence in COVID-19 communication campaigning through a wide variety of segments specifically included in their regular broadcasts. They broadcast a series of informative talks of health experts and experience sharing of celebrities affected with Covid through a component called *Corona*, *Jagrathayum Prathividhiyum*. "As the station is popular among the urban audience of Thiruvananthapuram city, the program was very successful and got much feedback from the listeners," said Mr. Biju Mathew, Assistant Director of Programmes. The FM station has also included awareness messages and tips in between their entertainment programs. The Corona special segments of *Ananthapuri FM* were podcasted on the youtube channel after regular transmission.

Past Studies

Health communication campaigns are globally acclaimed and made remarkable contributions to promoting healthy behavior and practices in society. These campaigns can be defined as "purposive attempts to inform or influence the behaviors in large audiences within a specified period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce non-commercial benefits to individuals and society" (Atkin, 2013, 2-19).

These campaigns are usually associated with the agencies' or countries' health education interventions. Xiaoquan Zhao, in the study *Health communication campaigns: A brief introduction and call for dialogue* (2020), said that health

communication campaigns could play a central or supportive role in health education and social marketing. But not all health education and social marketing programs include communication campaign activities.

Mass media campaigns act directly or indirectly to influence the cognitive beliefs and attitudes of the population and eventually lead to their behavioral change. "The great promise of mass media campaigns lies in their ability to disseminate well-defined behaviourally focused messages to large audiences repeatedly, over time, in an incidental manner, and at a low cost per head. First, mass media messages can set an agenda for and increase the frequency, depth, or both, of interpersonal discussion about a particular health issue within an individual's social network, which, in combination with individual exposure to messages, might reinforce (or undermine) specific changes in behavior" (Wakefield, Loken, and Hornik 2014, 1261-1262).

Mass media organizations in the private and public sectors engaged in various health promotion campaigns in different situations. The global audience considers public service broadcasters the most trusted source of information during COVID-19. In the study titled *COVID-19 and public service media: impact of the pandemic on public television in Europe*, Miguel Tunez (2020) pointed out that television news channels have been considered the second most reliable source behind government updates. Liz Corbin, Director of Information at the Eastern Broadcasting Union, also agreed with the point, and he said that millions of people turn to public service media in times of a global crisis like COVID-19, and the journalists from these organizations go above and beyond to get the best news on COVID-19 as soon as possible (Tunez, 2020).

The National Health Policy of India 2002 re-emphasized the importance of communication. The document commented that the substantial component of primary health care consists of initiatives for disseminating public health-related information to the citizenry. Also, the National Population Policy (NPP) 2000 insisted that radio and television be utilized as the most potent media for disseminating relevant socio-demographic messages (Harish and Goel 2015).

As the public service broadcasters of the country, Doordarshan and All India Radio (AIR) have a prominent role in the health communication initiatives of the nation. Doordarshan can be the most critical player in the health communication area as it covers 79.1 percent of the geographical location and 91.4 percent population of the country, says Harish and Goel (2015). AIR is one of the largest radio networks in the world. According to Harish, All India Radio had been the forerunner in implementing the health communication

strategy adopted by the government as they have a higher reach in terms of population and geographical area. He also pointed out that "it is the only mass medium widely accessible to rural and urban audiences. Radio also provides special audience programs on various subjects including health management even in the age of television revolution" (Harish and Goel 2015). Doordarshan and AIR significantly proved their role in various successful campaignings such as National Family Health Planning, HIV and Polio eradication programs, and the concept of a small family propagated through the slogan, *Hum do Hamare do* ('we two and our two') which was vigorously telecast through DD and AIR (Suresh, 2011).

Research Statement

Public service broadcasters play a prominent role in the health communication initiatives of the nation. The current study is an attempt to explore health communication initiatives taken up by major public service broadcasters in the state of Kerala in India-*DD Malayalam*, and *Akashvani* as part of their public communication campaigning related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study method

The researcher has adopted a qualitative method of conducting expert interviews from a panel. The panel of ten experts included leading public health practitioners, communicators, academicians, and media persons who were actively involved in the current effort to tackle the onslaught of the pandemic via appropriate communication strategies. The researcher has framed ten open-ended questions related to the problem under investigation and conducted separate telephone interviews with each of the experts. A detailed list of experts is given below.

1. Dr. B. Eqbal (Public Health Expert & Academician, Covid Expert Committee Chairman, Govt. of Kerala)
2. Dr. T.S.Aneesh (Public Health Expert, Community Medicine, Govt. Medical College Trivandrum)
3. Dr. K.P. Aravindan (Public Health expert & Member of the *Kerala Shasthra Parishad* movement)
4. Dr. V. Ramankutty (Public health expert, Rtd. Professor, Sree Chithra institute of Health Sciences, Trivandrum)
5. Dr. Indu P.S. (Community Medicine, Govt. Medical College, Kollam)

6. Dr. S. Gopakumar (Medical Superintendent, Govt. Ayurveda College, Kannur)
7. Sri. V.Jayakumar (Senior News Editor, *Mathrubhumi* Periodicals)
8. Smt. K.R.Beena (Deputy Director of Programmes, Doordarshan Kendra, Trivandrum)
9. Sri. Biju Mathew (Assistant Director of Programmes, All India Radio, Kerala)
10. Sri. M. Vijayakumar (Academician & Observer, Media Studies)

Theoretical background

There are several theories related to the current study, and the researcher has identified the following theories, which were closely associated with the investigation.

Agenda Setting Theory – The theory proposed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968 described that the media attempts to influence the readers and create a hierarchy of news prevalence. The health issues projected by the media always affect the viewers' thinking patterns, which may increase the awareness level of the various problems.

Diffusion Of Innovation - Everett Roger introduced this theory in 1961. He said that through diffusion, 'innovations' (a new idea, practice, or object) are communicated to the public, and such knowledge influences them to change their actions.

Theory Of Planned Behaviour – The theory of planned behavior is a psychological theory which is proposed by Icek Ajzen in 1985. It is an elaborated form of the Theory of Reasoned Action. The theory of planned behavior suggests that the person's behavior is influenced by his attitude on specific issues.

Results and Discussion

All the experts have recognized the role played by D.D. Malayalam and AIR in pandemic communication. But they also pointed out many inadequacies in their communication strategies.

Participation Of D.D. Malayalam And AIR In COVID Campaigning

Dr. Eqbal has opined that Doordarshan and AIR have contributed much to pandemic communication during the current crisis. Credibility and professionalism were evident in their content. "PSBs could propagate the messages effectively on the grass root, especially among marginalized sections like fishermen and tribals. Better awareness facilitated them reducing the death rate and severity of the pandemic. A huge amount of the elderly population were regular viewers of D.D. Malayalam and Akashavani. Thus the reverse quarantine messages were communicated very successfully, which helped to control the causalities in the state", he added.

Dr. Aneesh has also agreed with the comment and observed that the PSBs provided scientific knowledge to the public irrespective of any political inclination or agenda. Evidence-based expert opinions were very effective in persuading the audience. According to Dr. Gopakumar, the participation of PSBs in Covid communication was very productive and target oriented.

Smt. K.R. Beena has said that D.D. Malayalam has ensured regular broadcasting of live phone-in programs and expert interviews from the pandemic's beginning, while the channel's reach was comparatively less than the private players. Besides, D.D. Malayalam has telecasted COVID awareness messages in entertainment programs like *Kootinoru Pat*. Mr. Biju Mathew said that AIR Kerala had to face many obstacles in transmission in the initial phase of COVID-19, especially during the lockdown period. Still, the station could manage the difficulties and dedicated much air time for campaigning in both AM and F.M. modes of transmission. F.M. division of AIR could blend the information in entertainment programs like *Namasthe Ananthapuri*, as part of the COVID campaign.

Comparison Between Private And Public Broadcasters

The experts have observed differences in COVID campaigning between private and public media houses. Dr. Aneesh has pointed out that PSBs gave more scientific information, but commercial media sometimes provided unscientific and conflicting information. "The private media houses sometimes projected socio-political aspects of COVID rather than projecting it as a public health concern to gain more viewership. And the selection of experts in private media channel debates was controlled by several factors like ownership policies of the media house and political inclinations of the participants- he opined. According to Dr. Gopakumar ", as the private media are highly competitive, their content became more sensational. They tried to focus on the health crisis aspects as much as possible with daily statistics of COVID cases. Public media's resources and technical capability were comparatively less than private media, which was also reflected in the

production quality of COVID messages". But Mr. M.Vijayakumar has said that he didn't observe much difference between private and public media in the COVID communication campaign.

Dr. Ramankutty and Dr. Indu have observed that the PSBs presented the information in an educative way, but a creative and innovative presentation strategy was lacking compared to private media. "Lack of meticulous planning was visible in PSBs programming, and the redundancy of messages was also to be noticed. Different age groups require different types of presentation, and that customization was absent in PSBs", Dr. Ramankutty opined. Dr. Indu said that private media has more flexibility and provides more awareness tips in the middle of entertainment programs. Dr. Eqbal analyzed that parallel media communicated the Covid issues more effectively than traditional media, and more customized communication happened through social media.

Limitations Of COVID Campaigning Through PSB

Dr. Aneesh has observed that the primary limitation was the low viewership of PSB in the state, and only certain strata of audience from specific age groups are the regular viewers of the medium. "The advancements of social media interface and technological upgradations are not utilized effectively by public media. And most of the awareness programs were presented in an academic nature, focusing on motivating the audience of the state. The majority of the general viewers are not motivated, and some kind of entertainment-oriented presentation was really needed to capture their attention in health campaigning. Thus the PSBs should have adopted innovative and creative presentation methods to attract the general audience from all age groups. D.D. Malayalam and AIR could target the high priority groups such as the elderly population, but they missed the young generation in COVID communication campaigns," he commented.

According to Mr. Vijayakumar, the reach of Akashavani was much better than D.D. Malayalam. And he opined that "the PSB could have done better campaigning if more 'campaign capsules' were created. The participation of COVID volunteers and cured patients were low in PSB". Dr. Eqbal has observed that PSBs missed some relevant topics in COVID awareness creation. "They were not much focused on the issues like post-covid problems, the importance of ventilation support, open-air gatherings, avoiding occupancy of closed space, precautions to be taken while eating in small gatherings, etc." he said. Dr. Aravindan has opined that PSBs failed to sustain the initial enthusiasm and effectiveness in COVID campaigning. "The public experienced the fatigue of the pandemic. Thus they showed some negligence to follow COVID protocols intensively in the third wave of the pandemic",

said Dr. Aravindan. Dr. Indu has also agreed with this point, and she said that PSBs failed to overcome the community fatigue of COVID-19 with more innovative ways of presentation of messages.

Mr. Biju Mathew has added that as the pandemic affected the social and economic viability of the public, govt. forced to give relaxations in COVID protocols, and gradually the media reduced the high intensity of campaigning in the third wave. The public had already been given much more awareness about the pandemic, so the deep-level campaigning was not inevitable too, he said. Mrs. K.R. Beena also agreed and added that D.D. had continued the COVID campaigning through regular health programs.

Suggestions to Improve Mediated Health Campaigning

According to Dr. Indu, repeated presentation of the same scripted content will lower the efficiency of the messages. Timely improvisations in messages are essential to retaining any health campaign's sustainability. Dr. Ramankutty has also said, "Today is an age of podcasting, and the possibilities of that area should also be utilized in health campaigning. Participatory journalism activities can blend with campaigning". Mr. Vijayakumar observed that the mutual understating of the health department and media houses would enhance the effectiveness of health campaigns. Dr. Eqbal pointed out that personalized and targeted communication was increased during this period, and the mainstream media should also follow such an approach similar to parallel media to increase the reach of messages.

According to Dr. Gopakumar, three things are essential in health campaigning - the quick and timely dissemination of awareness with more scientific evidence, a mature and straightforward presentation to avoid a panic situation, and communication focus on overall health. Dr. Aravindan suggested, "In any pandemic, there will be a huge amount of fake and unscientific information. Hence every media organization should build a team with scientific training and academic background to handle the campaign and monitor the fake information". Mr. Jayakumar opined that the health campaigning through the media should focus on the behavioral level modification of the society, and the involvement of local self-government and residents association can be promoted to make it more effective.

Conclusion

Doordarshan Malayalam (DD Malayalam) and *Akashvani* (AIR), as public service broadcasters, made a series of consistent efforts in pandemic communication (COVID-19) of the state within their own limitations. Though the reach of the media was comparatively less than many of the private media

houses, they propagated a variety of messages related to SARS Cov-2 (COVID-19) in a more digestible form on a timely basis to the audience. The scientific knowledge disseminated through these PSBs has helped to control the pandemic's severity, especially among the marginalized segments of the population, as opined by the experts. Interviews and Live-phone in programs were much helpful in solving several doubts and misconceptions of the public about the pandemic. However, adopting more innovative and experimental approaches in the designing of the messages was lacking. Messages spread via entertainment programs like dramas or other art forms were not much attempted. According to experts, avoiding the redundancy of messages could have also enhanced the effectiveness of health campaigning. Creating more campaign capsules and 'infotainment' oriented presentations using the services of famous artists would have helped to overcome the 'community fatigue' of the pandemic.

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