



WORKSHOP ON BROADCAST JOURNALISM

How can environment make TV news?

23 November 2005

2:30 pm – 5:30 pm, Amaltas Hall, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi

Chaired by Nalaka Gunawardene, TVE Asia Pacific, Colombo

Panelist: A. S. Panneerselvan and Rakesh Kalshian from Panos South Asia, Kathmandu; and Damandeep Singh, National Geographic Channel India.





Background and purpose

The workshop's scope was defined and confined to the news and current affairs content on broadcast television. TV news is a powerful programme format as it attracts consistently high audience reaching a cross-section of society. How can this format be used optimally to cover environmental issues?

No. of participants

Around 45, mostly students of mass communication.

Chair's remarks

The Chair presented a series of questions that framed the workshops presentations and discussions:

- What exactly is an environmental news story for TV?
- What requirements have to be met for a TV channel to carry an environmental story?
- What green and brown stories seem to interest TV news bulletins or channels – and why? Is there such a thing as news agenda?
- Where do environmental news stories first emerge these days – newspapers, TV or websites? What triggers and processes are involved? Who follows whom?
- Where does an aspiring young TV journalist look for authentic, exclusive environmental stories?
- What does a discerning news editor expect and demand of environmental stories?
- Is there a bias for – or against -- environmental news in the news rooms?
- What factors hinder or block some environmental stories from getting on the news, or receiving sustained coverage?
- What pressures work on reporters, editors, managers and owners? Are there ways to work around these pressures, or ignore them?

Presentations

For Panneerselvan, journalism is not a profession but a mission -- one has to have one's political affiliation and strategy clear. A journalist should be able to pitch and argue for his story with his own gatekeepers. He said there are no 'full-stops' in good journalism; only commas – as a story evolves, the journalist has to stay with it and keep audiences updated. He suggested a slice-by-

slice technique of covering the same issue from different angles. Instead of focusing on only one, journalists should realize the media's limitations and work around them. It is also important to take a stand on some issues, and to push for a wide debate – not just to allow the voices of those in positions of power, but also the under-dog and voiceless.



Damandeep Singh acknowledged that environment issues concern not just a 'green reporter' but everybody in the broadcast media. But the question is: how do we communicate it effectively? He urged not to get typecast as an environment journalist, but try to relate everything to the broader environment and development concerns. A journalist

should have a clear agenda, but he did not agree with Pannerselvan on accommodating everyone's point of view. The powerful have their own way of getting their views across, so we journalists should concentrate on the normally voiceless.

Kalshian held that the media's grasp of environment was very narrow and shallow, where as in the real and wide world the issues are very complex with intricate linkages. It is essential for reporters to understand these complexities. For instance, why is it that a story in Bihar or Jharkhand does not easily get covered on the so-called national TV channels? He stressed that the art of a good environment reporting is not only to pursue an issue and refer to available reports, but also to be able to think through them.

As part of the workshop, two short films were screened:

- Extracts from a recent TV documentary produced by TVE Asia Pacific was screened. Titled *Deep Divide*, it profiled the work of three environmental journalists – in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka – who investigated the reality of environmental justice in their own countries, under support from Panos South Asia.
- Award-winning Indian film-maker Shekhar Dattatri screened his short film *Mindless Mining*, and described his struggle to end the Kudremukh Iron Ore Company's long disputed mining operations in the protected Kudremukh National Park, in Karnataka state in India.



Discussion

The panel remarks and film screenings were interspersed with lively discussion with participants.

The following are some highlights:

- If some environmental stories do not attract sufficient attention of viewers, the challenge is for reporters to make them interesting.
- Environment stories have to fight for space – a struggle as most media gatekeepers are 30 years or older, while TV viewers are mostly in the age group of 15 to 30.
- Instead of strict compartmentalization, linkages between environment and other aspects should be brought out. For instance, cutting down of trees in Uttaranchal (Chipko) had a direct effect on the health of women in the area.
- The voice of the journalist is the voice of the citizen. As such, for the journalist it is not niche but a part of life.
- Sometimes political journalists pick up specific environment and wildlife issues like tiger conservation. But that is more for the controversy than the science or substance of the stories concerned.
- It is debatable whether environment stories ought to be classified as such, or be mixed with other issues.
- Environmental journalism entails undertaking risks. However, it would be difficult to take up such risks at the beginning of one's career.
- Panneerselvan advised that there are certain taboo areas in any organization. Beyond these areas, the whole space is open. A beginner needs to figure out what these areas are so that there is less conflict of interests.

Key issues of concern

Should environment be mixed with other issues? This question, along with that of ethics, formed key areas of discussion.