

Human Elephant Conflict and the Role of Print Media

Marianne de Nazareth^{1*} and S. Nagarathinam²

¹*St. Joseph's PG College of Media Studies and COMMITTS, Bangalore, India*

²*Department of Communication, Madurai Kamaraj University, India*

*Corresponding author's e-mail: *mde.nazareth@gmail.com*

Introduction

Although the evidence that mass media deeply change attitudes is far from conclusive, perhaps this hypothesized agenda-setting function of the mass media is most succinctly stated by Cohen, who noted that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (McCombs & Shaw 1972).

At present the number of wild Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) is between 35,000 and 50,000 (www.elephantcare.org), while the number in captivity is around 16,000 and declining. The trend in almost all Asian range states has been a drastic decline in wild elephant numbers, due to a range of anthropogenic factors related to increasing human population, loss and degradation of forest habitat, fragmentation of breeding populations and increasing human-elephant conflict (HEC). The Asian elephant is categorized as an ‘endangered’ species in the Red List of the World Conservation Union (IUCN 2008: www.iucnredlist.org) and is classified as a Schedule one species with the Convention for International Trade of Endangered Species. Many studies have been carried out on HEC both in Asia (Sukumar 2003; Jayawardene 2004) and Africa (Hoare 1999), but despite the lessons learnt and the wide range of measures and management strategies that have been employed to mitigate HEC (Nelson *et al.* 2003; Fernando *et al.* 2008), the intensity of the problem is clearly increasing.

The notion that issues that are afforded a great deal of media coverage are the ones people view as the most important is called the agenda-setting hypothesis. Extensive research using different methods has confirmed the hypothesis

(McCombs & Shaw 1972). In 1993, Iyengar and Simon concluded that “agenda setting effects have been captured for all forms of mass media coverage, in both experiments and survey-based studies”.

Although we know the agenda-setting effect exists, the mechanisms by which the effect occurs are less clear. To specify the mediators of an effect is to identify the causal mechanisms by which one factor affects another. In the case of agenda setting, media attention to an issue presumably causes a change in a mediating variable in the minds of citizens, which in turn produces a change in importance (Miller 2007).

Monck (2008) in his book, “Can you trust the media?” says, “The power of the media to misinform has to be set against the potentially repressive regulation required to impose ‘the truth’ and the force that the powerful resort to most often to control the public silence. Let’s read warily” (Monck 2008). He writes this in the context of politics, but a parallel could be drawn with what the media publishes in the context of HEC as well. And as Berelson succinctly puts it: “On any single subject many ‘hear’ but few ‘listen’” (Felson 1996).

Specifically focusing on the agenda-setting function of the media, Lang and Lang observe: The mass media force attention to certain issues. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals should think about, know about, and have feelings about (Lang & Lang 1968). It is not clear the lesson the media teaches about the legitimacy of violence, or the likelihood of punishment (Felson 1996). However, the unedited clips aired on TV of elephants attacking humans without showing the entire sequence of

events or the graphic details the journalist goes into about the ‘rogue’ elephant can obviously be detrimental to elephants.

Reading a broadsheet newspaper regularly is strongly associated with mobilization, while watching a lot of television has a weaker association of the same kind. Tabloid newspapers and general television are not strongly associated with measures of media malaise. It seems to be the content of the media, rather than its form, which is important (Newton 1999). Therefore style, content, the heading and language are important in forming attitudes and perceptions in readers’ minds.

It is claimed that market competition and the search for bigger audiences and circulation figures force the media to dwell on dramatic news, especially bad news about crime and conflict, death and disaster, political incompetence and corruption, sex and scandal, anything else that is sensational (Robinson & Sheehan 1983; Edelman 1988; Negrine 1994). If there is little conflict, the media will exaggerate what exists, or try to create it (Lang & Lang 1968; Kerbel 1995). This connects strongly with the sensational words used in the stories and the even more sensational headlines for stories on HEC. The aim of this study was to establish if the press is biased or unbiased in reporting on HEC.

Methods

In order to analyse the content of the stories published on HEC, we manually trawled three newspapers – *The Hindu*, *The Deccan Herald* and *the Times of India* for coverage on HEC. The random sampling conducted by us has been between the years 2006- 2007. Our primary data was obtained by checking every copy of the three newspapers of every month, during these two years. Besides making a note of the headline, we copied the date of appearance in the month and also the link to use during coding of the text of each story. These three newspapers are the most well read broad sheet newspapers in the South of India. *The Hindu* and *the Times of India* are national newspapers while the *Deccan Herald* offers more localised news.

Research question: How objective and unbiased is the role played by the media in the Human Elephant Conflict?

We attempted to answer this question by using both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the text found in each of the stories collated over the two sample years 2006- 2007.

Coding frame

To make sense of the primary data that was collected by us, a coding frame to understand the different variables was made. Codes are mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and have to be applied consistently throughout.

Visibility: We counted the number of stories, which appeared on each day for three months in the three publications. The measurable scoring unit was the number of stories written each day in the newspapers over the sample period.

The coding included classification of whether the content of the story was negative, positive or neutral.

Measurements used to code tone

We used a scale from -1 to +1 to measure the tone of coverage. A value of -1 was used to identify a negative tone of coverage. A value of +1 was used to identify a positive tone. A zero-value identified a neutral tone. Each of the coded news stories was given a value based on this scale. This method of measuring required a subjective evaluation of the tone. For measuring the tone we relied on the reading of headlines and the clear assertions made in the main text of the news items.

Following are some examples of words and phrases in each of the categories:

Negative [-1]

Menace, strike terror, trampled to death.

‘This rogue elephant had created terror in the whole taluk in the last five months and had killed two persons besides damaging crops worth lakhs of rupees.’

Neutral [0]
Translocation, areas for grazing, project elephant.
'Conflicts arise when elephants stray into crop areas.'

with 39% of stories counted being negative, 35% neutral and 26% positive, were biased against elephants (Table 2).

Positive [+1]
Princess, elephant welfare, save pachyderm
'India now has less than 30,000 elephants, most of them running out of space to feed and live in far away from the spotlight focused firmly on the tiger.'

However there were significant differences between individual newspapers. The negative tone was visibly marked in the Deccan Herald with a less but still negatively biased tone in the Hindu. In sharp contrast, the tone in the Times of India was biased positively towards the elephant, with zero negatively biased stories. This suggests that the biases of reporters and/or editors working for the different newspapers, has a large influence on the tone of the stories published.

Results and discussion

Visibility of the issue as gauged by the number of stories was comparatively very high in the Hindu (n=54), moderate in the Deccan Herald (n=26) and was very low in the Times of India (n=8) (Table 1). Overall the broad sheet media

For the masses who read a daily newspaper, published stories play a large role in shaping their perceptions of wildlife and affecting their

Table 1. Number of news items in each category in the three newspapers*.

Dates	Positive			Negative			Neutral		
	DH	TOI	Hindu	DH	TOI	Hindu	DH	TOI	Hindu
2006 January	1		1	1			1		
2006 February		1				1	2		
2006 March									
2006 April									1
2006 May			1	2		2			1
2006 June			1	1		2			
2006 July			1			2			
2006 August	1		1	1			1		1
2006 September		1	1				1		1
2006 October		2				4	1		1
2006 November		1				1			
2006 December				2		2			1
2007 January				1		2			1
2007 February	1								
2007 March		1		1					
2007 April									
2007 May		1	1	1					
2007 June				1					4
2007 July			1	1		1	1		3
2007 August			3	1			1		1
2007 September				1		1			3
2007 October	1					1			1
2007 November						1			1
2007 December			1					1	2
Total	3	6	9	10	0	15	5	1	20

* DH = Deccan Herald, TOI = Times of India..

Table 2. Percentage of news items in each category in the three newspapers.

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Deccan Herald	54%	31%	15%
Times of India	0%	12%	88%
Hindu	22%	41%	37%

attitudes and actions. Cox (2006) states that mainstream and entertainment media are the most important sources of information for the common man, on the environment. It is environmental journalism, which plays a large role in providing information, and in educating and persuading audiences to act on environmental issues.

In this paper we have tried to look at environmental communication through an analysis of words and language used by journalists when writing about elephants, which may have shaped the individual and community outlook towards elephants over decades. We found that negative stories outnumbered positive or neutral stories. Being negative towards elephants does not help in solving HEC. Therefore we suggest that it is important that journalists should write more about elephants in a positive light. They should provide objective environmental discourses and alternative solutions, thoughts and perhaps greater concern for ethics and objectivity when covering this issue. This can only be done by increasing the technical knowledge and awareness of journalists who cover human-elephant conflict situations, so that they write knowledgeably on the issue.

References

- Cox R (2006) *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, USA.
- Edelman M (1988) *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Felson RB (1996) Mass media effects on violent behavior. *Annual Rev. of Sociology* **22**: 103-128.
- Fernando P, Kumar M, Williams A, Wikramanayake E, Aziz T & Singh S (2008) *Review of Human-Elephant Conflict Mitigation Methods Practiced in South Asia*. AREAS Technical Support Document, WWF.
- Hoare RE (1999) *A Standardized Data Collection and Analysis Protocol for Human-Elephant Conflict Situation in Africa*. IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, Nairobi, Kenya.
- Jayewardene J (ed) (2004) *Endangered Elephants: Past, Present and Future. Proceedings of the Symposium on Human Elephant Relationships and Conflicts*. Biodiversity & Elephant Conservation Trust, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- Kerbel M (1995) *Remote and Controlled: Media Politics in a Cynical Age*. Westview, Boulder.
- Lang K & Lang G (1995) *Politics and Television*. Quadrangle, Chicago.
- McCombs ME & Shaw DL (1972) The agenda-setting function of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* **36**: 176-187.
- Miller JM (2007) Examining the mediators of agenda setting: A new experimental paradigm reveals the role of emotions. *Political Psychology* **28**: 689-717.
- Monck A (2008) *Can You Trust the Media?* Icon Books.
- Negrine R (1994) *Politics and the Mass Media in Britain*. Routledge, London.
- Nelson A, Bidwell P & Sillero-Zubiri C (2003) *A Review of Human Elephant Conflict Management Strategies*. Oxford University, UK.
- Newton K (1999) Mass media effects: Mobilization or media malaise? *British Journal of Political Science* **29**: 577-599.
- Robinson MJ & Sheehan M (1983) *Over the Wire and on TV*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Sukumar R (2003) *The Living Elephants: Evolutionary Ecology, Behavior, and Conservation*. Oxford University Press, UK.