



A Study on Postgraduate Students' Perception of Mass Media in Creating Awareness of Climate Change in Agartala, capital city of Tripura in India

Upadhyaya Deepak

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Agartala, West Tripura District, INDIA

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Abstract

Media is a mirror of the world. We know about the world basically through the prism of mass media. We are living in a mediated world. It is needless to say that whatever perception one acquires about world issues like climate change is basically a creation of the mass media. In this context, the perceptions and importance attached to climate change by the mass media in their coverage of the issue leads the people to prioritize climate change accordingly in their personal life. No sooner than climate change has been recognized as one of the most burning problems of the present century by the media, public concern has also amplified worldwide. But ironically, awareness of climate change is abysmally poor amongst Indians even though the country ranks only after China and America in terms of carbon dioxide emissions. This paper is a humble attempt to know the perceptions of climate change and the role of mass media among the post-graduate students of Tripura, India.

Keywords: Climate change, mass media, perceptions, postgraduate students.

Introduction

In ancient Indian literature the earth was always revered as mother,¹ but presently global warming, also known as climate change, in the scientific circles, has defiled the mother earth beyond repair. Global warming has assumed the status of one of the most debated environmental issues in mass media in the present times². The excessive heating of the earth's atmosphere caused by a high concentration of green house gases in the atmosphere is known as global warming. Global warming is responsible for temperature fluctuations of the atmosphere and oceans over the recent decades due to addition of carbon dioxide emitted by every human activity. Unregulated carbon dioxide emission by all the countries of earth is a major cause of warming of earth and of grave concern³. Behind industrial and agricultural activities, green house gases are released in the upper atmosphere which traps the heat escaping from earth and it leads to massive climatic changes and sea level rise. Also rapidly increasing population in every country exerts tremendous pressure by way of emission of carbon dioxide and other heat trapping gases in the atmosphere. The world is rapidly experiencing warming effects which will have disastrous outcomes like the recent flash floods in Uttarakhand. Two thirds of the disasters that are presently happening in South Asia are climate related and of late, there has been a phenomenal increase in the intensity and severity of such climate related disasters in India as well⁴. The IPCC disclosure implores that the global warming induced environmental hazards may endanger the existence of humanity, for instance, failure of Asian monsoon⁵ may affect disproportionately crop growth and availability of soil water⁶ in India. But the question still persists: who is responsible for the given imbroglio? Scientists across the globe hold our race guilty for the same.

Media coverage is helpful in informing the public about the causes and consequences of climate change. Media can also go a long way in motivating action in favour of climate change mitigation⁷. The interplay between mass media and international climate change negotiations at many a UN Summits since Rio Conference has helped to outline the perceptions of the people on climate change issues⁸. Media can help in forging consciousness about the perils of climatic changes and motivated individuals in turn may demand proper policy interventions from the government to address the problem of climate change⁹. In tune with the above, Krosnick et al¹⁰ report that if the people have access to knowledge and information on climate change, it may lead to increased involvement for mitigation and adaptation measures. It has been recognized that the public relies on the media, more than any other source, to gain information on issues like climate change^{8,11}. This is why McComas and Shanahan¹² have also mentioned that mass media coverage is correlated to the awareness of climate change issues in the public perception which is further dependent on the cultural custom and traditions of the society where it functions. On the contrary, individuals, who are found to be unaware of the causes of climate change, seldom strive to engage themselves with effective mitigation measures. In this context, Whitmarsh¹³ mentions that the issue of climate change may be less most important to individuals who do not understand it and these individuals often found to prioritize environmental problems lower than other issues. Media exposure has an unswerving impact on the knowledge and awareness of individuals, as it often goads us what to think and which issues are to be given priority in our daily life¹⁴. The mass media is a powerful catalyst in the agenda setting process of a country and it goes a long way in demanding preventive measures in the form of policy

legislations to achieve emission reduction benchmarks as required in the Kyoto Protocol. Hence, mass media's coverage of climate change issues significantly shapes people's perspectives and can impact people's behaviour¹². The media can also contribute a lot in greening the earth by sensitizing the public, especially the youths and students of a developing country like India to adopt a low carbon dioxide lifestyle.

Material and Methods

A close-ended questionnaire survey was administered on the post-graduate students of Tripura University in between September 2013 to October 2013. The post-graduate students were chosen from all the science, arts and commerce subjects under Tripura University as it is the only university in the government sector catering to higher education needs of the citizens of the state. More than 850 questionnaires were distributed randomly, out of which 657 valid questionnaires were returned. This sample consisted 45% male and 55% female students whose age group was in between 21 to 35 years.

The youths in India are the most media-savvy section of the population. Though, a significant number of research studies have been conducted to aimed at decoding the perception of climate change among the masses in the West^{8,9,15}, but there is a dearth of studies in the context of a developing country like India. The students are the future leaders of the society and hence, this study aims to explore the awareness of climate change issues among the students of Tripura University undergoing post-graduate courses in different streams of science, arts and commerce. Also efforts were made to analyze the role of mass media in this regard.

Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that nearly 86.30% of the respondents have 'seen/heard or read' something on 'climate change' before receiving the survey. They were quite aware of it. Yet, only 82.19 % of the respondents revealed that they are 'sure' of climate change happening around in the present times.

It was also found that the respondents felt that the terms 'climate change' and global warming to be two different phenomenon. The students were 'more familiar' with the term 'global warming' than 'climate change'. Further, as many as 69.25% students revealed that they are 'more concerned' with 'global warming'. Thus we see that global warming and climate change connote different issues among the study respondents. From this we can infer that global warming was placed in a higher position of concern among the perception of the students.

The study also found that as many as 56.16% students have described that 'mass media' were their major source of information on climate change awareness. However, it was found that 'new media' like the 'internet' and 'interpersonal

communication sources' like 'friends and family' had identical role in dissemination of information on climate change.

If we combine 'fairly well' and 'very well' categories of respondents, we find only 32.11% of the respondents could be considered to be 'fairly well informed' regarding the causes of climate change, while as large as 62.55 % students were 'not well informed' about it. Similarly, it has been revealed that about 58.90% of the respondents were 'not well informed' regarding the consequences of climate change. Also it was found that only 31.81 % students were 'well informed' about the ways to mitigate climate change.

But interestingly, the study reveals that nearly 72.75% of the students perceived climate change was an 'important issue to them personally'. Similarly, it was found that about 80.97 % students are of the opinion that if nothing is done to reduce climate change; it will be a 'serious problem for the world'.



Figure-1
Map of Tripura



Figure-2
Geographical position of Tripura in Indian Union

Regarding the proximity effect of news media, figure -3 reveals the proximity and what the students perceived that climate change was 'rapidly happening in India' as the news of Uttarakhand flash floods were fresh in the memories of the students.

line with most of the previous research⁸ which says that event oriented' or 'disaster frame' is the most prominent frame in climate change reporting across the West. Ironically this frame takes the upper hand of the 'precaution frame' which ought to have been at the center-stage in climate change discourse.

Figure - 4 reveals that mass media took the pole position in terms of spreading awareness on climate change while the students perceive that different consequences of climate change are more often covered by the mass media. This finding is in

It was apparent from the results that most of the students would seek information from TV, newspapers and the Internet respectively very often than other sources.

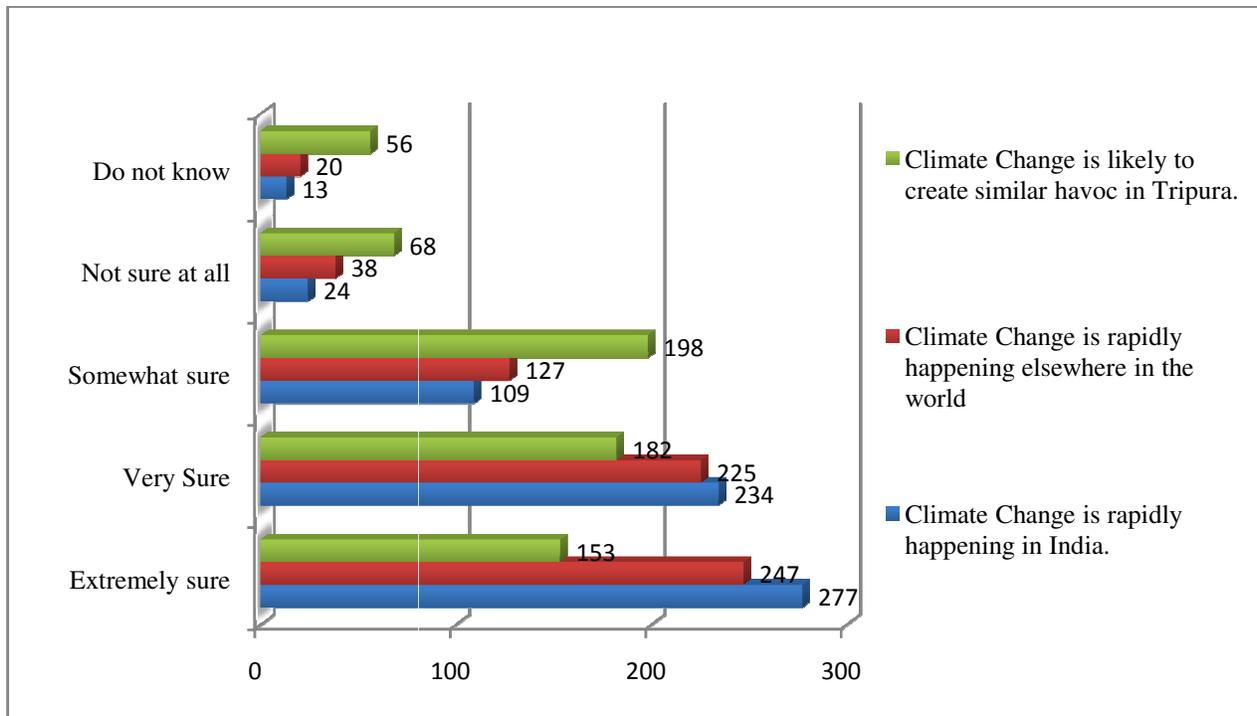


Figure-3
 Perception of Climate Change and its proximity

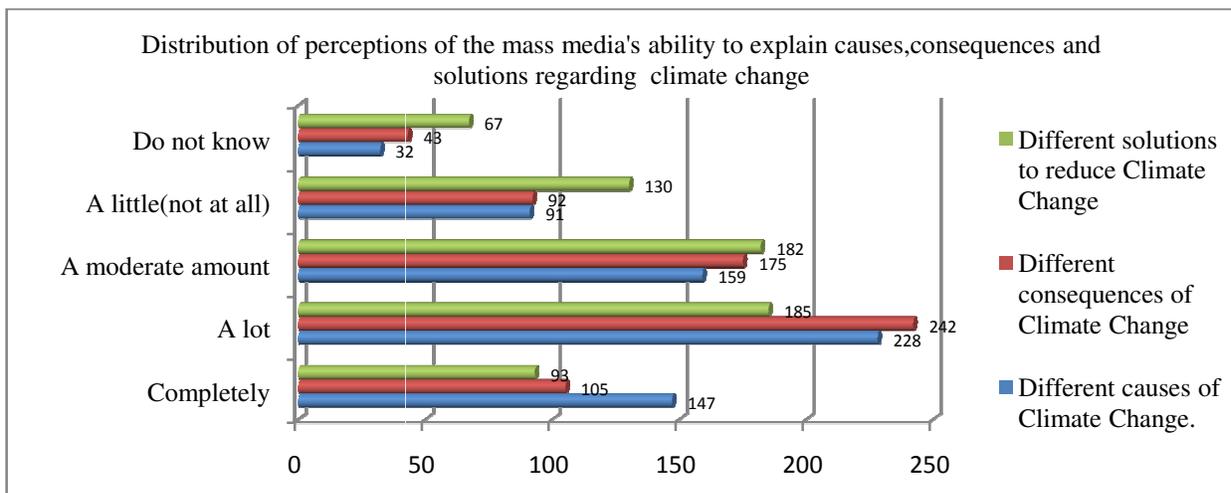


Figure-4
 Perception of Mass Media role in Climate Change

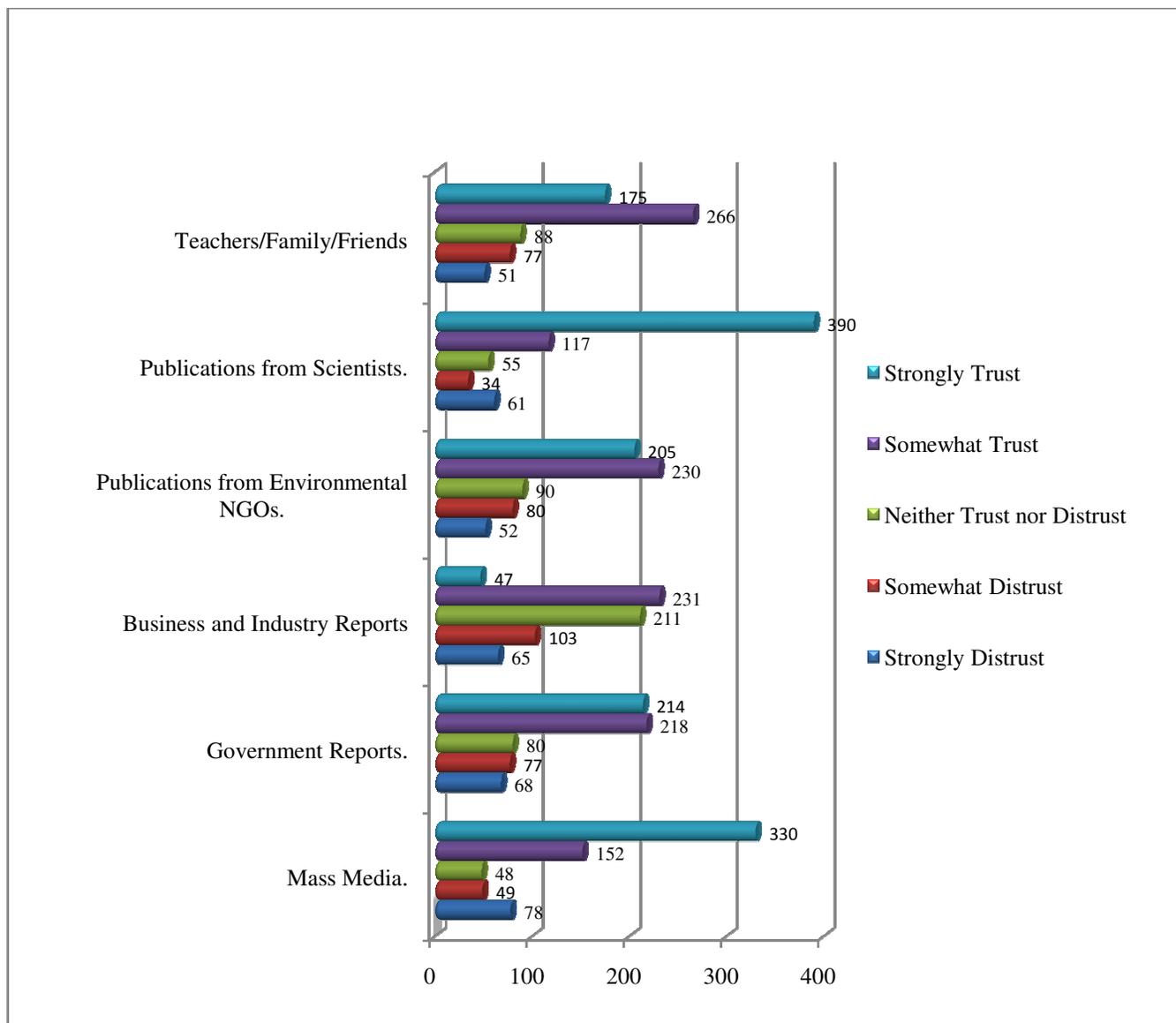


Figure-5
Perceptions of Reliability of Sources of Information on Climate Change

When queried about the perception of trustworthiness of the different sources of information on climate change, the students, as shown in figure-5, have revealed that ‘publications from the scientists’ are ‘strongly trusted’ by them followed by ‘mass media reports’ on climate change. Thus we can infer that, despite of a rat - race for garnering TRPs, the mass media outlets are reckoned with trust by the masses.

The study also revealed that as many as 70.47 % of the students prefer ‘private Cable TV channels’ over ‘Doordarshan’, the government broadcaster to give them reliable information on climate change. Thus we can infer that a public service broadcasting unit, being under government control Doordarshan does not command much confidence on certain matters of

public interest. Only a small minority of 21.92 % preferred ‘Doordarshan’ over ‘Cable TV channels’.

On another context, the study found that that ‘national newspapers’ were preferred over ‘local newspapers’ by the respondents to give them accurate information on climate change issues. Similarly, it was found that 66.97 % students prefer reading ‘newspapers’ over ‘magazines’ to give them better information on climate change. It can be inferred from the above that newspapers are still held in high esteem by the respondents in comparison to current affairs magazines. Though we can witness a boom in magazine journalism in India but the menace of paid news has undermined the profession of journalistic in the recent times.

Conclusion

The youths can be truly called the future custodians of the earth, its environment and common property resources. Youths symbolize action, speed change and dynamism. If they are motivated to become environmentally conscious citizens, we can really halt the global warming problem to a large extent. Climate change is also a developmental issue of great concern for a developing country like India¹⁶ where the proportion of younger generation is at the vanguard of economic development. This study reveals that there are some grey areas in climate change awareness among the students under study. We can infer that it may be even miserable in rural areas or in case of junior grade students. Now or never, if we want to tackle global climate change seriously, we have to adopt a low carbon lifestyle. Much more has to be done to educate the student community on the issues of climate change, mitigation and adaptation. Occasional awareness creation seminars on World Environment Day are far from adequate.

Environmental awareness needs to be cultivated¹⁷ in our country and it cannot be left to chance or casual appearance in mass media reportage. It would be pertinent to propose to the policy makers that schools and colleges in the state of Tripura should do more to fill this gap by mainstreaming climate change and global warming issues into curriculum with a view to providing students with the skills to pursue adaptive strategies in order to cope with the problems that climate change may set forth. Studies have revealed that not only the amount of information available but also the kind of framing by the media is significant in construction of perception¹⁸ regarding climate change issues among the public⁷ and media has a tremendous reinforcing effect¹⁹ in this regard. Positive approach in diffusion of climate change communication by media is the need of the hour. Newspapers and television may complement the teacher beyond the classroom²⁰. The mass media can successfully advocate climate change across the length and breadth of a vast country like India. It is needless to say that mass media is an important tool for making information accessible to the people at a cheaper and convenient way²¹. Along with the public broadcaster, private Cable television channels may well air public service ads to contribute their mite in awareness generation process. Social media is also a force to be reckoned with. By degrees, Face book, Twitter and other Internet based new media are becoming very popular among the youths of the country, so it can also offer a cost effective medium to spread the message on climate change. Policy makers should seriously think of roping these social media in the fight against climate change.

Due to constraints of time and resources, larger samples could not be considered. Future researchers would do well by including larger sample of students from colleges and schools as well for a conclusive finding. Under the above circumstances, all conclusions are necessarily tentative and open to debate. Nevertheless, the study could suggest the policy makers to take

note of the findings to get a nuanced picture for better diffusion of climate change information.

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