
Ergonomic Perspective to Media Occupation: Reference Northeast

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ABSTRACT

Occupational hazards are a mix of physical as well as mental pressures and it aggravates when freedom of work and expression is challenged with constraints. This reflexes adversely through various physiological characteristics. Working with mental satisfaction motivates towards perfection of tasks and productive performance. Media today has become such an occupation where two challenges are imposed upon the working journalists, one being the physical work environment and the other is being in constant pressure to sell their media content.

Reference Northeast, though a known fact is the working conditions for journalists in the region are very harsh and safety measures are equally less. There is a constant pressure for the journalists to focus and highlight on stories of violence and unrest. These have become a popular media perception and culture of the state and outside. The mental pressure to thrive negative portrayal is also very high. Every individual journalist when confronted regrets the state in which the region is being and has been projected in the media for the people to know it as an unrest and violent place, unliveable. But in practice everyone follows the unsaid practice of following the popular culture reinforcing the prejudices and stereotypes about the region. This mental stress and anxiety off course, as opined, affects the working and productivity of the journalists in long run.

This paper highlights need for ergonomics intervention, in terms of physical and cognitive workload of different nature in this field that has been transparent during a PhD thesis field survey on the practicing media personalities working in Northeast India.

Key words: Media journalism, content and representation, stress of negative projection

INTRODUCTION

Violence in Media- A Matter of Concern

Media productions, from newspapers to computer games, are pieces in circulation of capital (Kolker, 2009). Coverage of violence appears to be motivated by the profit margin, and often bends on the sensationalist ones. Issues are also prioritized based on their populist appeal. Some such coverage which have over time proved to be very well accepted and saleable as well as money-making are report stories about acts of violence especially on innocent and vulnerable individuals or groups, human rights violations, and the failure of the relevant official bodies to address the matter or to deliver justice, sufferings and terror struck people.

It is commendable that media outlets are proactive in this regard. By taking seriously the objective of communicating such happenings to the public, they create some pressure on the state apparatus to address the matter with urgency and to hold the perpetrators of the violence accountable for their actions. This is what is supposed to be the job of the media actually, but in doing so what is most of the time ignored or neglected is the fact that most of the stories are often incomplete in information and are based on sketchy details to begin with and less or improper research. And most of such stories are done, published, aired or hosted to serve certain purpose, which certainly is not meant for the society (William. 2008). And thus as also forgotten in a day or two, as soon as the job is done, damage done, faiths shaken or disturbance created; the content sales to business profit.

Similar is the case of Northeast India and the media industry. The region is sometimes been referred to as the “paradise in peril”. The region is a cultural and ethnic microcosm with conflicting ideologies and issues. People living outside the region have a mediated and largely distorted picture of the region and the people. Over the ages the militancy angle, the unrest and the distressed people are the only focus of media in the northeast and also outside, in the mainstream media (Baruah, 2005). And as these have become the only projected issues outside the region, even if media is not providing the bias; most of the time media is just stirring up the prejudices that lie deep within people. Accepting that negative stories have been on only because it does not defy the long existing trend, the media experts believe violent representation has been projecting and propagating Northeast and Assam in particular, in negative light to the rest of the nation and beyond. Journalists appear to selectively looking for such events to report to sale the content.

The media coverage of some of the events in the Northeast raises worrying questions about objectivity and responsibility of the media. Before the situation further aggravates, the media in Northeast India must take adequate steps to reduce violence in its content for the general wellbeing of the people. And thus this also raises opportunity of context specific detailed study on the effects of media violence on specified end user groups and also on the producers as well. To get audience attention, it may have positive or negative impact (Chakrabarti 2010), media many-a-times heavily focuses violence; and this may be seen seriously with its social consequences and ergonomic issues.

Considering the large and varied audience of the mass media with social, psychological, cultural, regional and age differences; their acceptance, rejections and reactions and effects on them are undoubtedly varied as well. The producers and practicing field journalists also combine into an important mix that are well or even more affected by the process of representation of the region through a patterned projection of violence. This results in stressful work environment and affecting work productivity, stress claims and lost creative productivity. Occupational hazards are a mix of physical as well as mental pressures and it aggravates when freedom of

work and expression is challenged with constraints. These reflexes adversely, through various physiological characteristics, often resulting in job stress, harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs and aspirations of the worker (Chakrabarti, 2011).

Media products, especially news with the basic motive of information communication, it is often a glimpse of the actual (people, places or events), most of it is either unknown or not represented except the sensational part which is capable of attracting a large varied audience. News representation as a whole is a commodity today, and like any other consumer product the media's usability aspect draws attention towards innovative ways of presentation linking ergonomic issues. Media today has become such an occupation where two challenges are imposed upon the working journalists, one being the physical work environment the other is being in constant tremendous pressure to sell their media content. With the professional goal to deliver media content on time in the performance-based profit driven media industry, the need of ergonomics intervention into the field becomes imperative; as working with mental satisfaction motivates towards perfection of tasks and productive performance.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study looks into enquiring the ergonomics intervention in the context of addressing occupational workload of media reporting; the below objectives were set:

1. To study the media content and reality of the situation through conducting a survey on media people working in Northeast India,
2. To study the context of prevailing occupational stressors in terms of physical and mental workload requiring ergonomics intervention in the media industry.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

The survey was conducted on the issues of information representation of social violence in newspapers (print media) and visuals on television (electronic media). It also focused on producers' intentions in communicating certain social violence in Northeastern part of India, and receiver's perception creation as per acceptance of the information through representation in media.

For getting the initial media perspective, based in Guwahati, four regional television channels - *News Live*, *DY 365*, *Frontier TV* and *Doordarshan Northeast*; and four newspapers- *The Telegraph*, *The Times of India*, *The Sentinel* and *The Sevensisters Post*, were surveyed. The television channels were selected based on highest viewership among the rest of the regional channels of Assam. Whereas *The Telegraph* and *The Times of India* are national news dailies having regional editions, *The Sentinel* and *The Sevensisters Post* are regional newspapers, all published in English are selected with circulation even outside Assam so that responses would be not confined to local views and aspirations. Interview material (through

questionnaires and specific discussions) was collected and compiled, and the common facts were summarised.

Gathering the views on work environment and role of media from all the above mentioned survey population, the enquiry strategy was framed that directed the further detailed ergonomic intervention in the occupational workload of journalist.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The survey revealed some issues that transparent a need for looking into deeper issues of media report and the wellbeing issues there by being on the Northeast. The below mentioned issues have come to the fore, the context forcing negative story priority for sale as a commodity and the journalists' wellbeing issues of working in a violence burdened occupational ambience.

Present media scenario: Northeast India

Indeed no national television news channel has correspondents in every state of the Northeastern region; most of the channels have one correspondent for the whole region. It is absolutely impossible for one person to look into the happenings of the entire northeastern states. Media houses basically work in collaboration with local houses with exchange of stories. And because of these tie ups, i.e. the mainstream television channels take up only selective stories from respective regional channels and thus the Northeast gets projected in national media.

As general consensus, it was found that violence which affects a large number of people is easily and instantly taken up by media houses. For the region is already branded as and known for only terror stricken, terror attacks by militant groups, ethnic clashes, etc. are supposed to grab headlines. And thus stories of mass violence are given priority over any other kind of news no matter how important it may be in real terms. Developmental stories and other regional events are segregated as less saleable stories and thus are kept away from the lead stories in the regional media, the so called mainstream media fail to even give coverage to them. This triggers a requirement of undertaking a thorough study on the approach of media representation of the region.

Northeast: Evoking work stress

Statistics reveal that the trouble torn State of Assam has lost over 20 editor-journalists in last two decades, with no perpetrator being punished till date. Tremendous work load, low returns in terms of salary and other legitimate facilities and ongoing unrest in the region puts tremendous challenges to the working journalists; making the work field increasingly dangerous is the subjection to numerous threats from insurgents, surrendered militants and even the anti-insurgent security personnel at times. Despite a phenomenal growth in the media, journalists have to put up with poor wages and working conditions, and the hazards of working in a troubled state.

Northeast as a whole, though a known fact is the working conditions for journalists in the region are very harsh and safety measures are equally less, there is a constant pressure for the

journalists to focus and highlight on stories of violence and unrest, which are in tune with the popular perception and popular culture of the state and outside, where they mainstream thrives for negative portrayal. The mental pressure to work against their will is also very high. Every individual journalist when confronted regrets the state in which the region is being and has been projected in the media for the people to know it as an unrest and violent place, unliveable with violence happenings being a part of life here. Most of the journalists working on field, especially the locals working in their own home region, do not like to represent Northeast in and through violent light. But they are either forced to do so or have less of choice. In practice everyone follows the unsaid practice of following the popular culture reinforcing the prejudices and stereotypes about the region.

Journalists working in the region are under tremendous pressure of selling their media product and also for survival. The working conditions are also found to be de-motivating for journalists to practice free and fairer means. This mental stress and anxiety (created and aggravated eventually throughout their careers) of course affects the working and productivity of the journalists in long run.

Journalists' views

Every individual journalist when confronted regrets the state in which the region is being and has been projected in the media for the people to know it as an unrest and violent place, unliveable. In practice, everyone follows the unsaid practice of popular culture of reinforcing the prejudices and stereotypes. It is noticed that shocking open ended information of direct violence images and visuals create uneasiness and insecurity leading to psycho-physiological stress, anxiety and trauma in people. The response highlighted scope of studying methods of innovative representation to convey messages in a positive and pleasurable way to the masses, specific to a section for which the window to the society is only these forms of media representations.

A need to control imaging and the way Northeast is being represented and portrayed to the world outside the region was made transparent through the study. Along with the negative stressful effects on indiscriminate target users of this kind of media representation and product homogeneity, it possibly may in long run cause adverse psycho-physiological stressful effects, mental stress and anxiety, the working, sensitivity and productivity of the journalists.

In the survey, respondents were in consensus to media depicting the region as violent, unsafe and terror prone. Accepting that these negative stories have been on only because it does not defy the long existing trend the media experts believe violent representation has been projecting and propagating Northeast and Assam in particular, in negative light to the rest of the nation and beyond.

The objective of media ideally is to inform people, not create prejudices and stereotypes; neither to provide tainted views to its consumers' thought only partial projections; and also

not to confirm and reconfirm notions. So if Northeast has been branded wrongly and has been brought to limelight, though in less than expected number of times, for all the inappropriate and negative reasons the status quo needs to be changed. Journalists (all who were surveyed) believe that media has the potential to do so, and they are also eager to see their working context in this light.

But when asked to practically stop practicing the same and stop representing violence and selling violence through their media products, there came a very different response from what they strongly believe. For the media houses and individual media person comes in the question of survival. As said by one of the respondents “If we don’t they will, we need to survive, and not only survive but lead the competition”. And thus does not end the vicious circle of representation of violence in the region and of the region; thus the commercialisation of news exists to rule the media content.

Reacting to the present media scenario

There is no denying the fact that the journalists here have to work under tremendous pressure and are emotionally exploited for a patterned projection of the region through violence.

Every individual journalist when confronted regrets the state in which the region is being and has been projected in the media for the people to know it as an unrest and violent place, unliveable leading to personal stress and professional pressure and hazards in work environment.

How much human mind can stand against such representation of direct violence scopes for study? Cognitive issues relevant to information perception and its physiological effect and overall wellbeing are a concern today. Ergonomics and media may complement each other, in looking into the issues of optimisation in violent media reporting, can create an overall well feeling to life which should be a concern for media journalism

Covering Trauma: Impact on the Public

One hand when the scenario is difficult for the media producers and practitioners on the work field, effect on the indiscriminant target users also appears to be an issue of concern. News coverage of traumatic event affects the public and the risk factors that exacerbate reactions of distress. People who have been directly or indirectly exposed to tragedy can develop trauma-related symptoms or post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, it is possible for a person to develop trauma-related symptoms after merely viewing media coverage of a traumatic event.

- Viewing news about tragedy can certainly be upsetting
- End users’ of media product experience negative feelings
- This interferes with functioning
- Health experts opine that distress is common
- Future research needs to examine the intensity and duration of such distress and whether it leads to pathological responses

Stressful negative imaging of media content

Media negative content and effects thereby, homogeneous content dispersed to heterogenic target audiences, can be looked into through ergonomics stress analysis of content and its design representation strategy. Coordination between ergonomics experts and media journalists would likely to show light in this issue.

Based on the responses obtained, it was reconfirmed that news from the region with the basic motive of information communication, is mostly a glimpse of the actual (people, places or events) most of which is either unknown or unexplored reality; and rest is not represented in media except the sensational part which is only understood as being capable of attracting a large spectrum of varied audience far and across. Out of the respondents of various strata of the media industry, academicians and locals the consensus was on the way Northeast has been projected outside the region through violence only.

Through content analysis it is learn that media texts on Northeast India define the region as bomb blasts, terrorism, infiltration, ethnic clashes, political violence, kidnappings, extortions militants, killings by security forces in actual or staged encounters, etc. Moreover, many of the respondents from the media fraternity believe that this misrepresentation in turn leads to further conflicts, tensions and violence. The national media houses give very less time and space to news from the region justifying it to be the region being out of proximity area. Whatever coverage is at all given is expected to be of massive potential, enough to grab mass attention. In this prevalent work scenario and job environment for the working journalists of the region, it becomes very stressful.

It appears to be very difficult to change the commercial attitude of the media makes of the region that bank upon unrestful happenings of the region, expand and express selective information, blowing out of proportion just to be a part of the competition and win the *headlines* or *breaking news* slot. Most of the regional media houses not only aim at their own TRPs (Television Rating Points) but also answer to the requirements of the mainstream media houses based far away from the region. While the decision makers in most of the media houses (national or regional) are quite away from the ground realities in not personally being present at the event and also not identifying with the prevalent circumstances, they lack understanding and awareness of the place and events, but they are the ones who decide and design the media content. The ones on field have less control over the final product that comes out. All that matters is the saleable value of the information like any other product in market.

Though a known fact is the working conditions for journalists in the northeastern states as a whole and Assam in particular, are very harsh and safety measures are equally less, there is a constant pressure for the journalists to focus and highlight on stories of violence and unrest, which are in tune with the popular perception and popular culture of the state and outside, where the mainstream thrives for negative portrayal. The mental pressure to work against their will is also very high.

Ergonomic perspective to media occupation

This paper highlights the need for ergonomics intervention, in terms of physical and cognitive workload of different nature in the media field that has been transparent during specific enquiry and field survey on the practicing media personalities. An issue of the stress and related malfunction on information communication is being raised here in where ergonomics and media journalism may work together for a better work environment and end product (content) development. In today's highly commercialised media sector that contributes towards mental pressure, work related stress; affecting productivity. With reference to Northeast India with its distinctive social and media scenario, there is no denying the fact that the journalists here have to work under tremendous pressure and are emotionally exploited for a patterned projection of the region through violence. As the journalists are more aware of the field, the problems faced and work hazards, ergonomic interventions may highly contribute towards bettering work environment and minimalizing health hazards and stress for the working journalists for media to have a soothing effect on the practitioners', consumers', the society as a whole (William. 2008)..

CONCLUSION

Representation of violence in media and its effect on individual as well as the whole society is a serious concern. All communicators, media content producers thus need to analyse and understand the consequences before putting forward any content to public. Means and methods are to be thoroughly studied in context specific environment. Role of media is not limited to act as a mirror to the society, and if at all it acts as a mirror media show also reflect the better side of the society rather than the gloomier one. Media representation also needs to be addressing the issue as to how to make it those who are looking into the mirror equally participate and reduce the ill effects of representations of violence in media (Chakrabarti 2011).

The above findings are on the effort of a research study being carried out in IIT Guwahati focusing on media reporting of violence specific to Assam and the Northeastern region in general. Work is still going on and is expected to generate means and methods through the locals aspirations that can be used for a positive imaging of the place and community in media overall benefit and development as well as wellbeing of the journalists working in the field and provident them with better work environment.

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