



**Semana temática:** Agua y Sociedad

**Eje temático.** Comunicación

**Título de la ponencia:** *Turning the tables: Role of media to engage the masses in water debates and practices*

**Autor:** Irfan Shahzad<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Periodista Paquistaní

**Resumen:**

It needs little stress that water is one of the most pressing issues confronting the populace of planet today, particularly so for the developing countries. One of the many reasons for the water woes of today emanates out of the lack of proper alertness, at people's level in particular. Media has witnessed very fast developments on the back of technological advancements in recent years. These developments have both pros and cons. True that media has played an vital role in increasing awareness of social issues over past few years. Yet, the coverage of issues such as water and sanitation remains far from desired. While water is by and large a less-reported and even mis-reported issue – whatever gets place in media is often plagued by/with commercialism, vested interests and lack of proper orientation of journalists. The human touch is missing, to a large extent. Resultantly, the desired goal of making the poor a “part of solutions” to the water problems remains a dream. Media in developing countries needs to prioritize water in its coverage, rise above commercialism on this critical issue and devise people-centric approaches in coverage of water issues. If the masses are involved the way they should be, little more efforts will be needed.

**Palabras clave:** water issues, awareness on water, role of media, involving masses, people-centric approaches

### **Introduction:**

Media, witnessing fast developments on the back of technological advancements, has played an instrumental role in increasing awareness of social issues in recent years. Yet, the coverage issues such as water and sanitation remains far from desired. This brief paper, or presentation as one may call it, attempts to present a bird's eye view of coverage of water in developing countries with special focus on Pakistan. The paper, based on a development journalist's own experiences and observations, ascertains that while water is by and large a less-reported and even mis-reported issue – whatever gets placed in media is often plagued by/with commercialism, vested interests and lack of proper orientation and training [of journalists]. The human touch is missing, to a large extent. The paper touches upon the present situation; problems confronted, and comes up with some recommendations for the betterment in state of affairs related to media coverage of this priority human issue.

### **Water and the developing world**

It needs little stress that water, sanitation and related issues fall among the most pressing challenges confronting the mankind today. A lot has been written and said on the subject. Exhaustive studies and information is available on and has been presented (even at this forum, in different “Thematic Weeks” organized by Water Tribune in ExpoZaragoza on various angles of the issue by learned scholars from all around the globe). There is no need to go in to details. Water issues facing the developing world range from irrigation to drinking water to sanitation and water born diseases. Just to make a passing reference that in developing Asia, home to major chunk of global population, a quarter of the people do not have access to clean drinking water and coverage of proper sanitation is even pathetic, for about half of the population.

It can however be mentioned that water is a particularly pressing phenomenon for the developing countries, as the developing world has far less financial and other required resources to deal with the variety of challenges faced on many fronts, water being one of them. The reasons for water woes of today's world are indeed multiple and complex. There is, however, little doubt in the fact that lack of proper alertness, at people's level in particular, is one among many reasons for the water woes of today.

### **Importance of mass media:**

No mention is needed for the importance of mass media in today's times. As mentioned earlier, media has witnessed very fast developments in recent years. The developments have been so fast and unprecedented that the age we are living in is being called as the “information age<sup>1</sup>”. Today, the media is playing the role of disseminator of information, facilitator for development, (and resultantly) the agent of change<sup>2</sup>. The awareness it is creating on a variety of subjects itself is decisive in probing and going about social changes, particularly with reference to environmental issues. This significance of mass media continues to increase with every passing day, as more people are becoming literate, more are getting connected to information technologies and spread/coverage of media is expanding.

---

<sup>1</sup> One can call it ‘dis-information age’ or ‘mis-information age’ depending upon particular circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> *Role of Media in Environment Awareness:* <http://www.thenakedeyefilms.com/research/mediaenvironment.htm>

### **Media: coverage of water and related issues**

The environmental issues of today, including those on the water front, have a close linkage with man's unprecedented development, in various forms and varieties. So is the case with the media coverage of the same. The fast paced developments and changes related to media, have both pros and cons. True that media has played a vital role in increasing awareness of social issues over past few years. Yet, there are many dimensions that need attention and steps to be taken.

**What is being covered?** There is definitely no dearth of water concerns taken by the media in developing countries such as Pakistan. Some issues, such as access to safe drinking water or waterborne ailments, do find place in the media and are covered on a periodic basis. Another critical issue highlighted well in Pakistani media is the need to build more reservoirs<sup>3</sup>. In Pakistan now, almost everyone shares the opinion that we need to build more dams; the main difference in opinions is on where to build and what kind should be built.

It can be said the situation of coverage in many other developing countries is almost similar. There have been some success stories, here and. A study conducted in India shows that media has been instrumental in promoting environmental awareness, including floods, drought and even sharing of water<sup>4</sup>. Media has also done well in raising awareness on issues such as forest protection in countries such as Kenya<sup>5</sup>.

**The challenges:** As mentioned above, while water is by and large a less-reported and even mis-reported issue – whatever gets placed in media is often plagued by/with commercialism, vested interests and lack of proper orientation as well as training and capacity building of journalists involved.

Commercial interests of media itself are, in my view, the biggest hurdles. "Ad hungry" mainstream media usually assign tasks to their reporters that best fill their bank accounts through increased advertisements' revenues. Issues of mass public interest come at the bottom of the priority list, if at all. Part of this particular issue of commercialism is, again, lack of proper knowledge and information among the journalists as well as media managers. Few of them really know that water is not just a social issue and water is a big industry, perhaps it would not be wrong to say an important group of industries, today. Covering water means covering a big human issue, indeed. Yet it also means covering big business, a business and industry that has enough capacity to quench 'ad thirst' as well, if conceived, planned, approached and executed rightly.

The biggest issue, it seems, is journalist's own knowledge and orientation, or lack of it to say precisely. Besides, media often takes different water issues as one-time-happening or event, and not as a continued process. The coverage, resultantly, has a limited perspective, and outreach.

---

<sup>3</sup> In fact, 90 per cent of available water in Asia is consumed by agriculture sector (McIntosh, 2003) and for country such as Pakistan the proportion is even higher, up to 95 %.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Forest Protection: The role of Media* [http://www.cemiride.info/repository2/WebFiles/Ogiek\\_media.pdf](http://www.cemiride.info/repository2/WebFiles/Ogiek_media.pdf)

Most of the journalists and media outlets approach the water coverage as such, and there is hardly any follow up. With this, only a limited awareness can be expected. And that too may be angled or biased at times, doing more harm than the benefit. There have been some endeavors aimed at journalist's training and capacity building around the globe by various intuitions. These efforts are indeed welcome, yet, a lot remains to be done in this connection.

Politics – global, regional and national – is another important factor. Media coverage of water issues is 'politicized' to a large extent. Take for instance the water sharing conflict among two nations such as Pakistan and India. Media coverage on respective side of the border is hardly objective, understandably so, considering the nature of bilateral relationship, particularly the hostile past of the two arch rivals.

Then there are water rights, or 'water wrongs' of different communities or peoples within one country. Never ending water sharing controversy among two most populous provinces of Pakistan, the Punjab and the Sindh, is classic example. A major dam project that experts think can make more water available for irrigation, can check disastrous floods and produce thousands of megawatts of electricity has been compromised, shelved recently, thanks to the unsettled issue. More examples can be counted. While this is a particular case in Pakistan where national media, by and large, has focused upon the 'national interest', urging the two provinces to solve their difference and work together for conservation of this precious natural resource, local and regional language media in two provinces has at time been seen fueling the controversy.

Media, of course, remains silent on a lot of other water issues, or their. What the media can and should do is make the people aware that water challenges are everyone's; that solution to water problems start from every single household. Sadly, that dimension remains missing in our media coverage.

### **Does media coverage really influence?**

The short answer is, yes it does! Proper and increased coverage impacts, in one form or the other. Assessing the impact of media coverage is not a simple or easy thing to do. Still, as far as our experience in Pakistan is concerned; there are shifts in behavior or opinions that we can somehow attribute to what is presented in/by the media. Speaking on a personal level, I think I was able to draw the attention of local authorities on the waterborne diseases attacking the residents of Rawalpindi, a city of about 2.5 million near the capital Islamabad, by first writing about it, and then encouraging other journalists to write about the same topic. It was back in 2001.

Another instance I can cite is that in 2006, I contributed an investigative story on poor quality of water and sanitation facilities in public hospitals of twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The story also revealed that the country's largest hospital, which is also Asia's largest in terms of number of patients visiting every year, has no water filtration plant of its own. The then federal health minister, under whom the hospital works, ordered immediate installation of the filtration plant. The story was so striking that presented a unique angle that it got noticed by a local NGO as well. The NGO planned and organized a seminar titled "Water in public hospitals", within a few days of the publication of the story. Friends at the NGO showed no hesitation in telling me

the idea came from my story, and previously, they had never thought of going for a seminar on that particular topic.

While empirical research findings are not available, or perhaps has not been conducted in the first place, observatory evidence suggests that the impact can also be witnessed at the grassroots' level. People now take greater care in washing hands before and after meals, they boil water before consumption where needed and possible. These are some of the changes brought about by the enhanced media coverage of water issues, besides awareness campaigns by the government as well as NGOs. (And even the messages of government/NGOS reach the people through MEDIA of one sort or the other).

### **Recommendations: What can be done?**

Here are a few of the recommendations that I would like to put forward for consideration at relevant levels and quarters:

- Proper orientation on, and deeper understanding of, the water issues are what journalists in the developing countries need now. Understanding that each neighborhood faces specific water concerns helps. That understanding has to come from each journalist. But they will need the help and active involvement of media-outlets and organizations involved in training the journalists<sup>6</sup>. (On a personal level, I can say that I learned a lot through training, capacity building and exposure and my understanding increased. The workshop helped me gain a broader perspective on the water issues facing Pakistan. I understand the problems more now, and recognize the bright prospects that still lie ahead. In a nutshell, I can say that the workshop encouraged me to be part of solution, instead of whining and crying about the problem.)
- At managerial level, media in developing countries needs to prioritize water in its coverage, rise above commercialism on this critical issue and devise people-centric approaches in coverage of water issues. If the masses are involved the way they should be, little more efforts will be needed for redressal of situation viz a viz water. It is time for journalists and media organizations to rise above job requirements and commercial interests and just present water issues, whether of national and global importance, as they really are, not as we want to portray them.
- The media must give due importance to the different water issues and not just focus on the current, boiling issues. One important issue in Pakistan is the debate on dam and canal projects. While this issue is important, an unfortunate result is that many, if not all of the other important issues take the back seat. Every single issue related to water has its own importance, and must be treated as such in media as well.

---

<sup>6</sup> In Pakistan, Thailand and Singapore, courtesy Asian Development Bank.

- Journalists should involve the marginalized sectors in the debate on water issues. With incredible reach through print, electronic and broadcast media, mass-media are in a position to provide people with accurate and appropriate information. Once the masses are involved, I think tables can be turned.
- There have been some good experiences such as the Asia Water Wire, a news feature service specially focusing on water and sanitation issues in Asia, managed by Inter Press Service (IPS Asia-Pacific)<sup>7</sup>. Now IPS is also running a similar feature service called Southern Africa water Wire. Such experiences can be and should be replicated. The coverage of such features services should, however, be expanded further.
- Mainstream print and electronic media should devote special sections/pages/airtime for water and sanitation issues.
- Yet, while people do watch the news media, entertainment media too has a great role to play. The ‘water message’ can also be conveyed very well through presenting the people’s heroes and heroines – the celebrities – as ‘role models’ for the water sector. It will convey a great message if some Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie are shown in any films using the water with care, and adopting the household conservation tricks. The same goes with local celebrities in different countries. .

## **Bibliography**

Asian Development Bank. (2007). *Asian Water and Development Outlook*. ADB, Manila.

Cockerill, Kristan (2002). “Context Is Key: The Media Role in Shaping Public Perceptions about Environmental Issues” in *Environmental Practices*, Cambridge University Press.

Inter Press Services-Asia Pacific. (2007). *Stories from the Asia Water Wire*. IPS Asia Pacific Center Foundation Inc, Bangkok.

McIntosh, Arthur C. (2003). *Asian Water Supplies: Reaching the Urban Poor*. International Water Association. London.

Reports of, and Presentations in various Media Workshops on Water and Sanitation for journalists in Asia, organized by the Asian Development Bank.

Regional Center for Urban Water Development-UNESCO (2007). Presentations in International Workshop on *Capacity Development for Water Journalists*. Tehran.

*Role of Media in Environment Awareness:*

<http://www.thenakedeyefilms.com/research/mediaenvironment.htm>

*Forest Protection: The role of Media:*

[http://www.cemiride.info/repository2/WebFiles/Ogiek\\_media.pdf](http://www.cemiride.info/repository2/WebFiles/Ogiek_media.pdf)

---

<sup>7</sup> The majority of the journalist that contributed for the wire were trained in the workshops organized by Asian Development Bank.