

ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL COVERAGE IN ADDIS ZEMEN AMHARIC DAILY NEWSPAPER

Yirgalem Abebe
Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, environmental-induced problems are huge and threatening. There is a common understanding that environmental degradation is partly due to lack of awareness about the environment. However, studies conducted in Ethiopia on this issue are very limited. This study has attempted to assess the coverage of environmental issues in print media. For the study, quantitative and qualitative data were used in combination.

Addis Zemen Amharic daily newspaper was selected for case study, and a sample of 120 editions, evenly distributed across a period of five years (2001-2005), has been analyzed. Results show that no permanent section was assigned for environment issues and no reports, interviews and commentaries were presented on the issue. The limited available coverage was inconsistent, showing a rising trend in one year and then falling in another.

The research also revealed that no proper emphasis was given to environment issues either within the newspaper or in the editorial policy; if at all covered, most of the environment issues were too brief and covered only indirectly giving high priority for other issues such as development, investment, agriculture, health and education. Scarcity of environmental information, poor information delivery system and journalists' lack of the necessary knowledge and training on the concepts of environment is some of the challenges faced in the environmental reporting.

Whether or not the absence of environment issues in the editorial policy has led those in the newsroom of Addis Zemen to ignore environment issues of great concern is difficult to tell. The poor emphasis of environment issues in the editorial policy may have ultimately resulted in poor and inconsistent coverage on the newspaper. As the editor of Addis Zemen explained, the personnel in the newsroom are trying to fulfill the objectives of the press stated in the editorial policy. The editorial policy is their guide and they are abiding by it; it guides the editorial room in every detail - selection, exclusion, prioritizing and killing of stories. Yet, the editorial policy has also given to the newsroom a mandate of setting any public issue as agenda of the newspaper, giving it the possibility of covering environment issues as one of the major issues. However, as the findings showed environment issues were considered as major issues neither by the editorial policy nor by the newsroom, and this shows there is a gap in the knowledge of environment issues both in the editorial policy and among journalists themselves.

Despite the existence of many environmental problems in both rural areas (such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation and erosion, desertification) and in the urban major cities (such as sanitary problems, water and air pollutions), these were

seldom mentioned in the paper. The main sources of information used were very limited (government authorities, Ethiopian News Agency); whereas the major stakeholders of environment issues - environmentalists, research institutions, industries, NGOs, and the society at large were ignored.

The research also found that Addis Zemen did not have a proper communication system with concerned government bodies (such as EPA) or with other bodies working on environment (such as NGOs). As understood from the interviews, the line of information between Environment Protection Authority and Addis Zemen is very weak. There is no proper linkage, which could enhance exchange of environmental information.

Overall, from the study's findings it is possible to generalize in saying that environment issues were not considered an important public issue, and were included in the major public agenda neither by the newspaper nor by the editorial policy of the press over the study periods. Therefore it could be concluded that under the current coverage, environmental awareness would remain very low; by implication, environmental mismanagement due to limited know-how would continue to affect the quality of environmental resources in the country.

From the results it is possible to conclude that given the current trend of environmental reporting, the journalists would remain environmentally illiterate. The study further concluded that unless environmental awareness is urgently created, public awareness would remain low and there would be further environmental degradation. Therefore, the study recommends that measures such as identification of awareness obstacles, setting environment issues as agenda, training and sensitizing of journalists on environment issues, and enlightened press management should be given due attention.

The specific recommendations of the study are as follows:

- > Awareness obstacles should be identified first; only then will concepts of environmental issues that require coverage stand any chance of success. Trainings of journalists on various environmental issues and in professional journalism itself are imperative; it is when journalists themselves are aware that they can play a role in creating environmental awareness. Therefore, the newspaper should seek mechanisms of getting its journalists trained in the basics of environment issues and enhancing their awareness about the environment problems of the country and the globe.
- > Enlightened press management may be the bottom line in better coverage of environmental issues. Many editors and reporters of environment issues believe real changes can come from the institution for which a journalist works. Therefore, Addis Zemen's editorial board should reevaluate the editorial policy itself to include more focus on environment issues.
- > Different programs should be planned in order to expose journalists to unexplored resources on the environment - the effects of environmental degradation, the requirements of new environmental laws, the requirements of

conveying ratified environmental laws and the requirements of the inclusion of experts' explanations and government officials in the coverage.

- > The impact of environment resources and human activities are news stories that need to be told in a manner that is understandable to the public. In-depth reportages may be a good tool to tell such stories. Journalists must deal appropriately with their sources (experts, the government, pressure groups, and the public), the audiences (reading public) and their immediate supervisor. Stories about the effects of environment issues on ordinary people should also be delivered to make readers to grasp the complicated issues of environment.
- > Information about environment should not only be a top-down perspective, but also should arise from people's needs. Addis Zemen can encourage greater public participation debates that shape public policy. As it has also been given the role of setting the agenda, it should assign a permanent section for environment issues to be covered regularly and to invite the reader to have their says. This is in line with the agenda setting Theory of McCombs and Shaw as the selection of news is seen to have a powerful effect on what the public will think about.
- > Addis Zemen should also assign a page or a column for environment issues so that environmental NGOs can subsidize environmental pages. It may also hire freelancers from various amateur journalists' clubs and may use them as beat reporters after giving trainings on environment issues.
- > Both journalists and policy makers need to learn each other's languages so that the newspaper actively participates in communicating ways to build public empowerment. Addis Zemen should seek means of working in cooperation with such bodies; it should develop channels of communication and exchanging environmental information.
- > Addis Zemen should also use diversified sources so that stories could be more reliable and balanced. EPA for example has a newsletter and a biannual magazine called Tefetro (Nature) from which journalists can get environmental information. Addis Zemen should also create information exchanging channels with other media institutions - print, broadcast and electronic as well as government and non-government media.

Economics for Ecology [Текст]: матеріали XX Міжнародної наукової конференції, м. Суми, 6-9 травня 2014 р. / Редкол.: Д.О. Смоленніков, Л.А. Кулик. - Суми : СумДУ, 2014. - 145 с.