

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Print Media: A Kerala Perspective

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Abstract

The print media has played a significant role in Indian history. During the early decades of the 19th century newspapers began to circulate in Kerala. The State is best known for its literacy, healthcare, and socio-economic development. Nearly 60 per cent of the population reads newspapers every day (Indian Readership Survey, 2019). News consumption in Kerala is high compared to other States because of political consciousness, demography, literacy rate and standard of living of the people. The print media has been playing a vital role in newsgathering and reporting across the country during the Covid-19 pandemic. This article intends to identify the consequences of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown on the print media in Kerala. A sharp decline in circulation and advertisement revenue has disrupted the printing and distribution of newspapers and periodicals across the State. This paper looks at the various managerial measures taken by the media for their survival and the government policies and initiatives as a stakeholder in order to improve the present scenario. For this study, published reports of the Indian Readership Survey (IRS), WHO and various online newspaper reports have been referred to. Government interventions at central and State levels have been made to mitigate advertisement dues from government entities. Moreover, many newspaper establishments have resorted to salary cuts, edition cuts and work from home arrangements to reduce their operational costs.

Keywords

Covid-19, print media, pandemic, lockdown, Kerala

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Introduction

Since pre-independence, India has witnessed a remarkable development in the area of print media. The later years of the 19th century were seen as a glorious era of newspapers where newspapers were constantly reporting diverse social issues and saw the birth of dedicated journalism, and stood for social reforms and public welfare (Ray, 2009). The print media had a pivotal role in the freedom struggle, and its history dates back to the late 18th century. In India it was in 1780 that James Augustus Hicky established the first newspaper, the *Bengal Gazette*. Later on, a number of newspapers from different parts of the country began to be published among which the *Times of India* and *The Hindu* were prominent. Newspapers play a vital role in educating, informing and entertaining society. Usually, people consider print media as a credible source of information and a source of future reference. It has also been considered a part of our rich tradition. During the early decades of the 19th century, the Christian missionaries in Kerala laid the foundations for education and the press. In 1847 Hermann Gundert, a German scholar, started the first Malayalam daily *Rajyasamacharam*. By that time, a number of dailies and weeklies had emerged in Kerala, of which *Keralapatrika*, *Keralamitram*, *Nazrani Deepika*, and *Satyanandom* were the prominent ones. In 1890, *Malayala Manorama* was published in Kottayam. In the wake of the freedom struggle came the *Mathrubhumi* in Kozhikode in 1923 established by K.P Kesava Menon, followed by other dailies such as *Kerala Kaumudi* (1970), *Chandrika* (1939), *Desabhimani* (1940), *Veekshanam* (1976), and *Janmabhumi* (1977).

According to the key findings of the Indian Readership Survey 2019, *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* are among the top ten dailies in terms of Average Issue Readership (AIR)¹ and have retained first and second positions in Kerala in terms of AIR and total readership. *Vanitha*, *Aarogyamasika* and *Balarama* are among the top 20 magazines in the whole of India in terms of readership. There are other local dailies, weeklies, monthlies and fortnightlies which have been printed by different publications. The Malayalam press today has a diverse and deep-rooted market in Kerala. The unique characteristic of the Malayalam press is the high penetration rate. It is around 56.1 copies per 1,000 people speaking

¹ Average Issue Readership of any publication is the number of people who claim to have read the publication within a time period equal to the periodicity of the publication preceding the day of interview.

the language (Ahmed, 1986). The high literacy rate, socioeconomic awareness, and well-designed editions with high local relevance are considered to be the main factors for this high rate. Some of the dailies have now initiated their digital platforms in the form of news channels and e-papers as a part of market diversification. Kerala is a leading State in terms of news consumption, news criticism and news as a business. The IRS Survey (Indian Readership Survey, 2019), points out that around 59.73 per cent of the State reads newspapers when the average readership of the country is nearly 16.5 per cent. The countrywide lockdown has severely affected the printing and circulation of newspapers and magazines all over the country.

Objectives and Data

The outbreak of Covid-19 has been wreaking havoc around the world. It has been threatening the global economies and many industries are on the verge of collapse. As far as the media is concerned, it is their duty to continuously report all events during lockdown. It is more difficult for them to survive as business entities since revenue has declined. This paper has the following objectives:

1. To study the impact of Covid-19 on the print media in Kerala.
2. To learn the managerial decisions taken by the print media for their survival during lockdown.
3. To analyse various government interventions made to overcome the pandemic situation in Kerala.

For this paper, data was obtained from secondary sources, mainly from data and articles published in digital newspapers like *The Hindu*, *The New Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, *The Economic Times*, *The Print*, and published reports of the Indian Readership Survey. These web sites have been given as references. The paper analyses the facts and figures in a descriptive manner.

Covid-19 Outbreak: India and Kerala

The Director General of the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic and instituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) as per the advice of the International Health Regulatory Emergency Committee on 30 January 2020 (WHO, 2020a). A confirmed case of a student who returned from Wuhan

in China with the Covid-19 virus was reported from Kerala on 30 January 2020. Subsequently, three more cases were reported in Kerala. The emergency situation was closely monitored by the Kerala Health Minister, K.K Shailaja, and the Principal Health Secretary and updates were shared at regular press meetings. The WHO Country Office for India supported Kerala in disease surveillance, laboratory testing, and risk communication, as per the India Situation Report-2 (WHO, 2020b). Eight WHO consultants were assigned to 14 districts of Kerala for rapid response. Subsequently, on 11 March 2020, WHO declared the Coronavirus disease outbreak as a pandemic. It was on 25 March 2020 that Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown for a period of 21 days. Later on, the country witnessed a two month long complete shutdown. The Kerala government launched the 'Break the Chain' campaign for promoting the importance of social distancing and hygiene, and was a great success. The Kerala Arogyam portal was launched by the Department of Health and Family Welfare with comprehensive information on Covid-19. Community kitchen initiatives provided free meals to poor labourers, persons in quarantine and other needy people. Thus, the Kerala model of controlling the epidemic has its roots in the strong health system (WHO, 2020c). The Covid-19 outbreak has brought every sphere of life to a standstill. No industry was spared from its impact. In 2020, Covid-19 had become a trigger for media consumption shifts due to the high alertness among people regarding the pandemic. The biggest impact of Covid-19 on the print media was on the advertising revenue, and in reaching out to people who were unable to go outside during the lockdown. It has been estimated that print advertising has seen a fall of over 90 per cent and Kerala is no exception (Sabherwal, 2020). Due to the misconception of spreading the virus through newspapers, people hesitate to buy newspapers.

Print Media and Covid-19 in Kerala: An Overview

The major impact of Covid-19 on the media and entertainment industry has been seen on the print media, as digital media began to attract a massive audience. This struggle is of a different magnitude. The news consumption has increased, and there is an unfavourable effect on the penetration of the print media in Kerala under the prevailing conditions. Print copies have also been reduced due to the retail shops remaining closed according

to official restrictions. The floating population is a prominent customer group who used to buy dailies and periodicals from street vendors, bookstalls in railway stations and bus stands. These have almost vanished since the public transport system has not been completely restored. The distribution of newspapers in Kerala has not been affected and it is close to the 100 per cent circulation prior to Covid-19 (Sabherwal, 2020). There were difficulties in connection with the production and distribution of other local dailies with lower circulation, such as shortage of print reels, insufficient funds, and problems with the distribution networks.

Rumours were spreading around the chances of transmission of the virus through printed newspapers. The Newspaper Society Kerala Committee introduced a campaign with a printed advertisement in all Malayalam dailies to gain support for fighting against this fake news. It played an important role in building confidence among readers. The State government pointed out that the distribution of newspapers would not be affected during the lockdown period. *Mathrubhumi* took the initiative to raise public awareness by making a video depicting their efforts to hygienically produce a newspaper. This video shows the hands-free fully automated printed, sanitised wrapping and bundling processes. Their entire distribution was done in fumigated trucks with masked and gloved handlers. *The Hindu* group of publications also came up with a similar campaign: 'Stay home Stay Vigilant.'

Financial Crisis

Newsgathering and fact-finding are a challenging and costly exercise for the print media as compared to digital media, since they invest a huge amount in machinery, manpower and materials. In the times of Covid-19, journalists have been putting their efforts into continuously accessing first-hand and authentic data. The financial difficulties faced during Covid-19 and the steps taken to reduce the burden are discussed next.

Descent in Advertisement Revenue

The newspapers have been losing advertisements as most of the business enterprises are out of work. Apart from the subscription charges, advertisement income is the major source of revenue. It was not only in the case of dailies but also for magazines. The Indian Newspaper Society,

in a letter to the Supreme Court, pointed out that the newsprint cost of a newspaper establishment is about 40-60 per cent of its expense. The net circulation revenue, which is the cover price of a newspaper, covers only a small portion of the total cost. Hence the lifeblood of a newspaper is revenue from advertisement (Rajagopal, 2020). In Kerala, there was a decline in print advertisements of more than 90 per cent.

Nevertheless, it is noted that some advertisers such as the government, banking sector, health insurance institutions and online educational portals continue to advertise in the print media since some have yielded business advantages in the pandemic situation. The safe and regular distribution of newspapers in Kerala has not made much impact as most of the businesses of the advertisers have been affected and need to be revived. It would take a fair amount of time for the entire print media to get back on track, says M.V Shreyams Kumar, managing director of *Mathrubhumi* (Sabherwal, 2020). The advertising expenditure forecasts 2020 released by Group M T Y N Y reveals that the volume of advertising spending in print media is estimated to drop from 180,164 million to 180,140 million in 2020 (Best Media Info Bureau, 2020).

Advertisement Dues from the Government

Apart from business enterprises, government ministries, organisations and autonomous bodies used to advertise in different visual and print media. In India, the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) is the nodal agency providing the paid publicity requirements of all central government organisations, ministries, and public sector undertakings. This publicity includes an audio and video campaign, print advertisements, hoardings, posters, and booklets. The agency owes between Rs.10,500 and 10,800 million to various media companies. Of this, Rs. 8,000-9,000 million is owed to the print industry alone (Rajagopal, 2020). Around five per cent of the revenue of the print media is from government advertisements. There is a positive response from the government side as government departments have already started clearing their dues. The Kerala government has also asked the Information and Public Relations Department to release the dues to various media houses immediately (Venugopal, 2020).

Cost Reduction Measures

Since advertising revenue has been falling, the publishing houses have begun to control their spending. They are working on various cost cutting measures to minimise the production costs. One of the important costs is labour which is paid as wages and salaries to employees and spending on electricity and transportation which can be controlled. Almost every daily has reduced their number of pages from 14 to 12 as the first step towards cost reduction. The supplement of *Mathrubhumi: Nagaram* which comes daily in five editions to Trivandrum, Kochi, Kollam, Thrissur, and Calicut has been temporarily stopped. Similarly, the daily supplement of *Malayala Manorama: Metro Manorama* also ceased its production. *The Times of India* has laid off 13 journalists in Kerala. The Thrissur, Kottayam and Malabar editions of *The Times of India* shut down their operations in May 2020 and employees of these editions were asked to resign (*The News Minute, 2020*). *The Hindu* is also planning to announce cutting down their operations. They have put forward an option of a voluntary retirement scheme in order to reduce their manpower. The Gulf edition of *Madhyamam, Gulf Madhyamam* was successfully circulating daily from seven countries across the Gulf. Now it is on the verge of shutting down as most of the countries have stopped the printing and distribution of newspapers due to Covid-19. Ahead of the national lockdown in Kerala, the print media faced a huge loss with readers opting for online editions. Many were forced to implement cost reduction methods like laying off employees and cutting down salaries. The management prefer their staff to work from home in order to avoid the transmission of Covid-19.

The Indian Express has instituted different levels of pay cuts for employees on each pay scale. Those who earn below Rs. 0.5 million would not be affected. A cut of 10 per cent is applicable to those who have an income between Rs. 0.5 and 0.75 million, and between Rs. 0.75 million and 1 million there would be a 15 per cent cut. There is a 20 per cent pay cut for an income between Rs. 1 million and 2 million, and between Rs. 2 million and 3.5 million, there would be a 25 per cent pay cut. Those who earn above 3.5 million would have a pay cut of 30 per cent (Jadhav, 2020). Some of the local dailies who hired staff on a contract basis are not renewing their agreements and terminating them without prior notice. Part-time correspondents, proof-readers, field promoters and executives come under this category. In a letter to the Government of India, the Advertiser's

Agencies Association of India demanded the clearance of outstanding bills by way of income tax and Goods and Service Tax (GST) refunds. To help the industry, the Indian Broadcasting Foundation and News Broadcasters Association sought the removal of five per cent customs duty on newsprint, and two year's tax holidays for newspaper establishments (Dutta, 2020). It also asked for a waiver of 18 per cent GST on advertisements. The final decision is with the government.

Conclusion

It has been a tough situation for print media due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is uncertain how long it will last. The transmission of Covid-19 and the subsequent countrywide lockdown has disrupted the newspaper industry. The print media in Kerala is a vast sector, as news consumption, criticism and news engagements are very high compared to other States in India. In fact, the newspaper readership in Kerala is higher than the national average. Fall in the advertisement revenue is a major threat, and outstanding dues from the government is yet another issue. As far as Kerala is concerned, the circulation of newspapers has not been affected even during the lockdown. The majority of news dailies could still deliver the paper to the doorsteps, except in some areas. It is very important for the management to take the necessary steps against these adversities. Many in Kerala have taken cost reduction methods like salary cuts, closing down editions, reducing page numbers, termination of employees, and reduced print orders. The media associations in the country and in the States have demanded government interventions to protect the industry through necessary policies.

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