Credibility, resilience and sustainability and the COVID-19 pandemic: A study of Kannada print media

Padma Rani
Manjushree G. Naik[1]
Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India

Abstract

The Indian Media industry was affected by the pandemic circulation, and revenue started declining. Print media organisations devised ways to cope with the financial instability by cutting down their workforce, closing down editions, merging various editions, reducing the number of pages and salary cuts of their employees. Print revenues declined by a 41% fall in advertising and a 24% fall in circulation revenues. (FICCI, 2021) The regional newspapers could recover a large part of their circulation. Print in India is thriving in Tier II & Tier III cities due to the opportunities available for literacy, economy, and population size. Diversity in India fuels the growth of traditional media. This paper seeks to analyse the Kannada Print media during the pandemic. Kannada is the official language of Karnataka, situated in the south-west part of the Indian Union. The study analyses how the Kannada Newspaper organisations operated during the pandemic. In-depth interviews with the management and the editorial team were conducted to understand their coping strategies to deal with the pandemic. The analysis points out that the print media organisation's credibility and resilience have helped them sustain themselves in the market.

Keywords

[1] **Corresponding author:**
Manipal Institute of Communication, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, 8QXR+F34, Madhav Nagar, Eshwar Nagar, Manipal, Karnataka 576104.
Email: manjushree.naik@manipal.edu

Introduction

India has a newspaper in all Indian languages and English. According to FCCI report 2021, Kannada, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil newspapers registered a growth. Kannada is the official language of the state of Karnataka, situated in the southwest part of India. Kannada is the eighth most spoken language in the country. According to the 2011 census conducted by the Government of India. Kannada print media recorded a growth of 13% in the year 2020. Regional media can deliver hyperlocal news that has contributed to the strong customer loyalty and preference for regional newspapers. Hence the study focused on Kannada print media.

The circulation of the Kannada newspapers in thousands is as follows: Vijaya Karnataka (8,226), Vijayavani (7,655), Prajavani (7,642), Udayavani (3,582), Kannada Prabha (2,438) and Samyuktha Karnataka. The publication of these newspapers continued uninterrupted during the pandemic. In-depth interviews with the management team and the editorial team were conducted to understand the working and coping strategies they adapted to deal with the pandemic.

India reported the first COVID-19 case in December 2019. From March 24, 2020, the Government of India imposed a complete lockdown to prevent the coronavirus spread. In its various phases and forms, the lockdown continued in India until July 2020 (Ghosh & Mallick, 2020). The Indian Media industry was affected by the pandemic, circulation and revenue started declining. Advertising in English newspapers has decreased by 52%, while advertising in Hindi and regional languages has decreased by 35%. Print revenues declined by 41% in advertising and 24% in circulation revenues (FICCI, 2021). Print showed a decline in all categories. Fearing that circulation would not rebound to pre-COVID-19 levels, advertisers did not return in sufficient quantities. (FICCI, 2021). The circulation figures were affected by the spread that newspapers could be the coronavirus's carrier. In metros, English newspapers bore the brunt of the pandemic. (FICCI, 2021). The lockdown increased online news viewing, estimated to reach 454 million unique visitors in 2020, up from 394 million in 2019 (FICCI, 2021). Many print enterprises have a distinct digital division, focusing on items like websites, apps, and e-papers. However, monetisation remained a struggle, with digital products accounting for less than 5% of total ad sales for most print enterprises (FICCI, 2021). Print media organisations devised ways to cope with the financial instability by cutting down their workforce, closing editions, merging various editions, reducing the number of pages and salary cuts of their employees. Most print media company have reduced their costs by 25% (FICCI, 2021).

In 2020, newspaper circulation revenue in Hindi and vernacular languages plummeted 20% from the previous year, while English circulation revenue dropped 50%. Due to the fear of infection, many building societies and resident's welfare associations in metro cities banned doorstep delivery of English newspapers, resulting in a drop in circulation revenue (FICCI, 2021). However, by December 2020, average circulation had returned to roughly 80% of 2019 levels, with unequal distribution between languages (estimated at 88%) and English (67%) (FICCI, 2021).

The regional newspapers could recover a large part of their circulation. Print in India is thriving in Tier II & Tier III cities due to the opportunities available for literacy, economy, and population size. 'India's diversity and scale will continue to fuel the growth of traditional media…' (Sanjay Gupta, in FICCI, 2021). One of the leading Hindi newspapers Dainik Bhaskar Deputy managing Director, Pawan Agrawal, believes that credibility and trust in print as a medium of information is at an all-time high. Advertisers are confident about the print medium as it delivers the response to their advertising. The main unique selling point of print has been credibility.

Credibility

Credibility enables Print Media to build its brands of journalists and increase its share of readers' time. According to Maathuis (2004), 'credibility is a concept linked to the sender and refers to the degree to which an object is considered to be a reliable source of information, products, services, and other matters'. Correct and timely communication can increase credibility in the eyes of various actors. Birley and Norburn (1985) argue about the significance of credibility in establishing businesses. Messages are interpreted and evaluated through the filter of the receiver's perception of the message's source, according to McCroskey and Teven (1999). No message can be received independently of its source.

Furthermore, source credibility is multidimensional. According to McCroskey and Teven (1999), source credibility has three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. Different writers use different terms for these dimensions, but theorists agree on two. 'Competence' refers to qualification, expertness, intelligence, and authoritativeness, whereas 'trustworthiness' refers to character, sagacity, safety, and honesty (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). The third dimension, 'goodwill', or 'perceived caring', varied over time, but McCroskey and Teven (1999) defined it as understanding, empathy, and responsiveness.

Furthermore, whether the goal of the communication effort is persuasion or the generation of understanding, source credibility is critical (McCroskey &

Young, 1981). The newspaper's credibility has increased, and the interviewees have also reaffirmed that in cases such as the COVID pandemic, the relevance of the credibility rises. Media information becomes an acritical component of society's function. Because of the high amount of uncertainty, most people look to the media to comprehend and judge the environment in which they live. 'Udayavani group of organisation controls 60% of the market share in Coastal Karnatak, and other 40% are divided by English media and per went vernacular language newspapers. Credibility is an ongoing process and part of working culture. The credibility is maintained through three layers of filtration before finalising the published materials. The news is wetted and rewetted before reaching the bureau heads and the editors. If it happens accidentally, as the organisation is also dependent on external sources, the organisation does not hesitate to accept the mistake and apologise.

Moreover, the organisation has set its credibility and has touched every second household in the area. The readers compare the news appearing on television channels with Udayavani newspaper content to check the credibility. Such is the newspaper's reputation', added the CEO of Udayavani. The company may attract more customers and use brand awareness and client loyalty.

This helps to avoid the disinformation to a large extent. Prajavani, a leading Kannada daily, has a column on fact-finding wherein the readers are invited to send their doubts on the news. The credibility of the news item is analysed with the help of software for the purpose published. Another respondent reaffirmed that though the readers are frequently exposed to social media messages, they trust the news only in newspapers. The message credibility has helped the newspapers develop a positive relationship with the readers (Ledingham, 2003). The channel through which the message is distributed and the message structure may impact its credibility (Metzger et al., 2003). The characteristics of a message that influence its believability are referred to as message credibility (Roberts, 2010).

Mc Croskey and Teven (1999) talked of source credibility and its dimensions. Mc Crosky and Young (1981) emphasised the criticality and importance of source credibility. 'Although readers frequently are exposed towards these forwards all over social media, they do trust the news only in newspapers', says the executive editor of Kannada Prabha. 'Health awareness articles and new regular columns were started. The newspaper aimed at more engagement with the readers. At the same time, engaging with the readers is again a challenge during post-COVID. The continuation with the bond was important', observes the editor of Vijaya Karnataka.
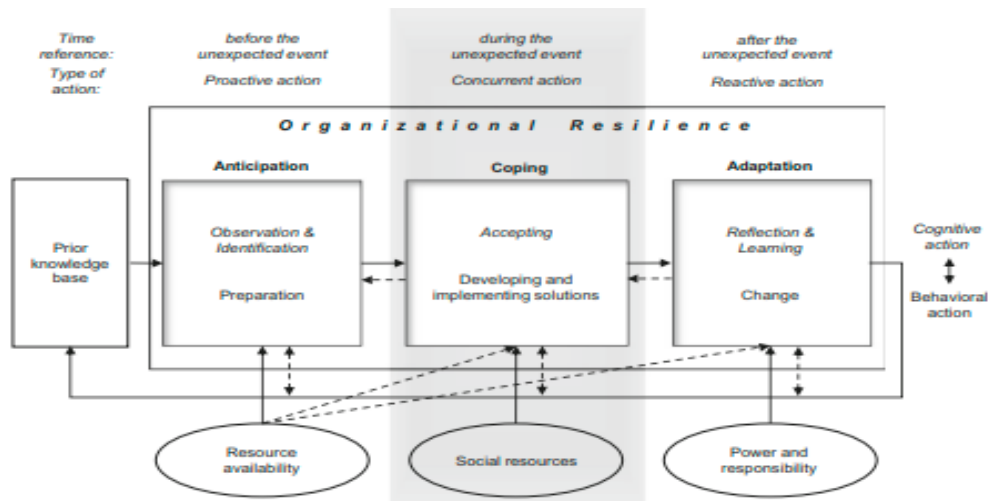
Resilience

Organisations need to develop the resilience capacity to deal effectively with the crisis and grow in future. Resilience is a dynamic process in which there is an interaction between the organisation and the environment (Duchek, 2020). Based on this perspective, an organisation has to deal with resilience after the crisis and before the crisis and during the crisis.

For an organisation to develop resilience, they need to go through three successive stages: anticipation, coping and adaptation, as Duchek (2020) proposed in his capability–based conceptualisation of organisational resilience.

A capability-based conceptualisation model proposed by Duchek

Anticipation is the first step in organisational resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic was one such crisis that arrived unannounced or unanticipated. Organisations must recognise early crisis signals and respond to them quickly (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016). The Kannada newspaper organisations were able to understand the nature of the pandemic. Nobody anticipated that there would be a complete lockdown and business activities would come to a standstill. The Government of India action regarding COVID-19 began with the weekend curfew, and then came the lockdown, and it was reopened in a partisan manner. The newspaper organisations were permitted to function with adequate safety guidelines. The first thing that needed to be done was divide the staff.

Udayavani divided the editorial staff into three groups, two groups were working on a rotation basis, and the third group was kept as a reserve group. The idea of a reserve group was essential as even if one group member was infected, the whole group had to be quarantined. 'The essential category was grouped into three teams with 33% each. Small batches were created. Though the workload was heavy, 33% of the employees worked for a week. It was on a rotation basis. They were also offered accommodation facilities', reported the managing director &CEO of Udayavani.

All Kannada newspaper organisations in the study confirmed that they realised there would be a financial crunch as advertising revenue had dipped to zero in the lockdown. The uncertainty had affected the circulation of newspapers too. The rumours that newspapers are the carriers of the virus was common in urban areas only. Preparation in terms of resilience, organisation means a business or firm 'is equipped to deal with unforeseen adversity and it is ready to capitalise on expected opportunities' (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2009). Resources necessary in times of crisis include a recovery plan, mutual understanding, and effective relationships. Samayukta Karnataka took up extreme awareness drives through public demonstrations and initiated sanitation processes for the newspapers. The delivery boys and agents were given hand gloves and sanitisers. They were educated on the safety of receiving and delivering the newspapers. The newspaper also sought the help of television advertisements to educate the masses about the safety of using newspapers.

Resource availability in terms of physical resources, workforce and logistics supply influence the preparation and the capacity to deal with the crisis.

An essential element in terms of resources in a newspaper organisation is newsprint. An organisation has brought the newsprint in bulk and much lower price than during the lockdown. As they had excess stock, they could share with another short supply organisation (Udayavani, CEO).

For an organisation, it is not enough to accept a crisis, but solutions need to be developed and implemented (Jaques, 2007). The capabilities could be an immediate or short-term response to the crisis. The anticipation and coping capabilities are closely related. Coping capabilities involves accepting, developing and implementing solutions to overcome the crisis. For implementing solutions, there needs to be coordination between the formal and informal structures in an organisation.

Social resources are social capital, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and the shared vision among the organisation members, various networks within and outside the organisation. Resources positively influence the resilience of

an organisation (Duchek, 2020). 'Besides, the lower cadre employees came and requested a salary deduction out of a sense of commitment towards the organisation and fear of losing employment. Due to the risk factor, and the tea breaks and servings were reduced'. (Udyavani, CEO).

'Nearly 80 to 90% were on work from home. However, the establishment expenses did not reduce as we had to offer the laptops and internet facilities to the employees assigned work from the home schedule. Besides, the negotiations were done with the landlords to reduce the rent of the offices by 15 to 20%', reported the editor of Vijay Karnataka. 'The other adjustment in terms of the economy was to share the transport expense by different media houses. Pre COVID scenario enabled different transport facilities by all the media organisations. The Post COVID situation compelled the media houses to compromise with rival publications to use a single vehicle for a similar route. Later readers would pick the newspaper of their choice' (Vijayavani editor). 'When it comes to the distribution channel, the vehicles used to distribute the newspaper copies were reduced. Vehicles were only sent in those places where the number of circulations was high. 30% of the expenses were saved', observed Prajavani editor.

Besides anticipation and coping, resilience also includes adaptation. Adaptation is the ability to change in the long term. It includes reflection, learning, and organisation change capabilities (Duchek, 2020). Reflection and learning are about organisations stepping back and pondering the crisis and solutions implemented and learnings from the crisis, which can be implemented long-term. 'The new trend was a shift towards digital media. It was an attempt to reach out to the readers without much investment. The PDF formats and links of e-paper were distributed through WhatsApp (Udayavani, editor). The other successful attempt by Prajavani Group was going FB Live, which was a huge hit with more than 15 lakh views, which was followed by other language newspaper publications. YouTube channel has crossed lakhs of views', maintained the executive editor of Prajavani. 'Apart from that, there was a dilemma over the digital platforms. However, never a platform could be parallel. News consumption patterns in cities have changed, and the content requires something innovative. News is becoming customised and individualised as the pandemic has hit the lifestyle. The attempts are made. However, it is in the trials and error phase', observed Kannada Prabha, the editor.

'The existence was a question, and it was a period to experiment. The publication was compelled to adopt several changes enabling multimedia technology. The concept of native content was introduced under the title "Brand

Spot". As it was a question of survival, the publication had to deviate from the ideological stance to a certain extent. A disclaimer runs stating that this content has no relation with the editorial section and consider it as an advertisement. However, other language publications do not run any such disclaimer', said Prajavani editor.

Organisation change is higher-order learning that can only happen when organisations are ready for cultural readjustments. The organisations can exploit the new solutions and transfer them to their parts. The change agents need to be recognised and a critical element in resilience.

When an individual is empowered in an organisation and has a sense of responsibility to accept the change for good, it influences the organisation's resilience.

'First and foremost, the publication decided to reduce the expenses incurred. The pages were cut down to 10 in place of 16. Prajavani was offering supplements every day, which was stopped', observed the editor of Pajavani. 'The first reaction to the crisis was to reduce the number of pages and magazines. The pages were reduced to 10 from 18. This helped the organisation with 40% savings. After reducing the pages, the production cost came down to Rs 8', added Kannada Prabha editor.

In the case of the pandemic, there was no prior knowledge base that the organisation could fall back. There has also to be a balance between cognitive and behavioural action for resilience. Cognitive action refers to mindfulness, sense-making and critical thinking. Behavioural action implies the implementation of improved experiments and knowledge gained. These are the main drivers of an organisation. During the COVID-19, all Kannada newspapers took cognitive and behavioural action to keep their organisation tide over the difficult times. None of the newspaper organisations studied had stopped publication for a single day. They did reduce the number of copies, the number of pages was reduced. Prajavani and Udayavani stopped the publication of their magazines in order to maximise their capabilities with a minimum workforce. Collaboration between competitors could be seen during the pandemic and has continued even after the second lockdown. After the first lockdown, the newspapers did not face a problem collecting news from credible sources.

The first lockdown had taught them how to work with minimum staff, and also press conferences, meeting announcements by governments were all being done online. The online platform used by these media houses also made attractive as there was a surge in users.

Sustainability

Organisations' sustainability implies creating long-term values by considering how a given organisation operates in the ecological, social, and economic environment. Sustainability assumes that developing strategies would foster the company's longevity. Organisations that opt for the sustainability route are best positioned to survive, both for their benefit and for society's well-being. (Fabio, 2017). The core concept behind the idea of a sustainable relationship between business and the environment, which was first articulated roughly two decades ago, is that environmental conservation and corporate goals do not have to be mutually exclusive (Barbier, 1987; Hawken et al., 1999; Holliday et al., 2002; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Firms are subsystems of bigger macrosystems. Managers must manage their assets to ensure both short-term profit and a long-term income stream for their companies to exist. Firms that do not effectively handle intertemporal trade-offs face hazards at the micro and macro level of study. Firms face immediate risks at the micro level when they fail to control their income flow. Firms that underinvest in research and development, for example, risk eroding their long-term worth. They are subject to indirect risks at the macro-level if the system fails because firms collectively fail to balance the short-term and long-term (Hayes & Abernathy, 1980). As a result, a company that manages both the short and long term reduce risk both inside and between the levels of analysis. Sustainability necessitates compromises, especially over time.

The changes made by the organisations after the two-phase phases of lockdowns in terms of cutting down physical resources like bureau offices in other towns and cities and other states; cutting down the size of the workforce except for the Samayukta Karnataka.

Employers and employees could communicate via technology, document transfer, and sharing information about their present work situation. During the COVID-19 outbreak, employees benefitted from adopting an open-source platform to easily carry-on conversations, read, and obtain new knowledge by decreasing their movements outside the home and using time more productively (Almunawar, Anshari, & Susanto, 2018). During a crisis, activities can be continued from home using a smartphone and the internet because practically everyone owns a smartphone, and no additional hardware is required (Susanto et al., 2020). By working from home, they were also saving electricity bills and other resources at the workplace. Cost-cutting was highly effective. None of the Kannada newspapers taken up for the study had shut down their publications, even for a single day during the pandemic.

After the second lockdown, as things are slowly returning to normalcy in India, in October, November 2020, advertisements of FMCG products, digital marketing companies have started appearing in Kannada newspapers.

Though there was a fall in the advertising revenue by 41%, the Kannada newspapers have regained much ground.

In terms of circulation, it has returned to its original numbers as endorsed by a few people from the organisations interviewed. Simultaneously the surge the digital media witnessed during the pandemic continues to exist.

All the Kannada newspapers used digital media in the sample. The pandemic brought an awareness among the management of the newspaper organisations about the necessity to adapt to digital media. 'The portal was reintroduced with attractive columns. A new website was introduced. COVID awareness was instrumental, and also some news on practising Yoga, helped the website garner the huge number of views and reached out locally', added the editor of Vijayavani. The Kannada print media has sustained itself by balancing the organisation's short term and long-term goals. The task is not simple; it requires various permutations and combinations to engage with the top management and editorial heads.

Conclusion

Despite various obstacles, the Kannada print media has continued its publication throughout the pandemic. The Kannada media is small compared to the English Print media in India. The readers acknowledged the credibility of the print media during the times of the pandemic when misinformation and fake news circulation was shared on other platforms. Kannada organisations adopted various ways to ensure the credibility of the news published by verifying the sources and fact-checking using the software. The Kannada print media reduced the number of pages, merged editions, stopped printing some editions and reduced their workforce to reduce the cost. Some organisations faced a shortage of newsprint.

On the other hand, one organisation with the newsprint stock shared with other newspaper organisations. The resilience adopted by the Kannada print media organisations also helped them cope with the adversities and sustain themselves in the two stages of the pandemic situation in India. Some of the steps, such as providing e-paper and circulation of paper on WhatsApp, have strengthened its bond with its readers. Sustainability of the Kannada print media organisation during the COVID-19 is possible due to the credibility it enjoys among its readers and the resilience these organisations have shown

to deal with the crisis. The whole business model of the Kannada Print media needs reinvention in the light of the pandemic. The newspaper organisation learnt from the first phase of the lockdown to work remotely with minimum staff presence in the office. The steps taken to reduce the economic burden on the organisation due to the pandemic continued to be practised even after the second lockdown. The limitation of this paper is that the top management's views are considered. Future studies can be carried out by studying bureau offices and the readers' views.

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