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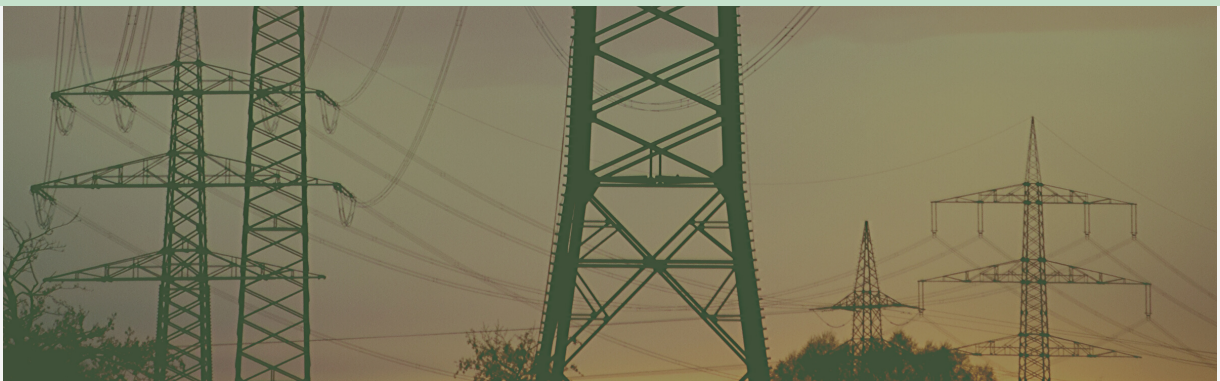
Citizen consumer and civic Action Group



Media coverage of electricity themes, topics & issues in Tamil Nadu: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT: This study presents the extent of media coverage that was extended to the subject of electricity in Tamil Nadu (TN) during 2009-18. The study is further supported with an analysis of patterns, trends, commonalities, gaps and social media reach of electricity themes, topics and issues in TN.



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I. INTRODUCTION

“The news media, our windows to the vast world beyond direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of that world.”

- Maxwell McCombs¹

“The media’s agenda is the pattern of news coverage for the major issues of the day. The salience of these issues on the media’s agenda influences the salience of the same issues on the public’s agenda”

- Agenda-Setting Theory,
Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw²

News media³ has a significant role to play in keeping the masses informed, shaping public opinion, setting the public agenda and in turn, enhancing public participation in the decision making process.⁴ The multidimensional and normative role of the media has been evolving over the years with varying degrees of focus across different subjects. Given the significance of news media and its patterns of news coverage, this study examines the extent and nature of focus that news media extends to the subject of electricity in Tamil Nadu (TN). The purpose of the study is to understand the approach and capture trends in reporting electricity topics and related issues in TN. For, news platforms serve as the primary source of information for electricity consumers across the state.

¹ McCombs, Maxwell. 2004. *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

² McCombs, Maxwell, Shaw, Donald. 1972. *Agenda-setting function of mass media*. *Public Opinion quarterly*

³ ‘Media’ in the realm of this analysis refers to ‘News Media’

⁴ McCombs, Maxwell, Edna Einsiedel, and David Weaver. 1991. *Contemporary Public Opinion, Issues And The News*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.



II. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study analyses news content published on electricity topics in TN between 2009 and 2018. The aim is (i) to inquire into the extent of media coverage of electricity topics and related issues; (ii) to study the trends of media reporting on the said topic; and (iii) to identify commonalities and gaps in its coverage.

III. APPROACH & FRAMEWORK

Both quantitative and qualitative approach is adopted to examine the extent of media reporting on electricity topics in TN. The methodology adopted involves analysing 632 print and digital media articles across 53 news sources between the years 2009 and 2018. The news articles are retrieved through Google News search engine using keywords #electricity and #Tamil Nadu. CrowdTangle, a social media analysis tool is employed to inquire into the reach garnered by these articles on social media platforms.



Fig 1: Word Cloud of prominent news sources that were accessed for the study

A news analysis framework is developed to understand and effectively study the trends in news media reporting on the subject of electricity, in TN. At the first level, headlines are categorised under ‘electricity topics.’ Further, these topics are classified into broader ‘electricity themes’ in keeping with the focus of the news items. Finally, the contents of each of the news item is studied in detail to identify the ‘issues’ that the electricity topic stems from.

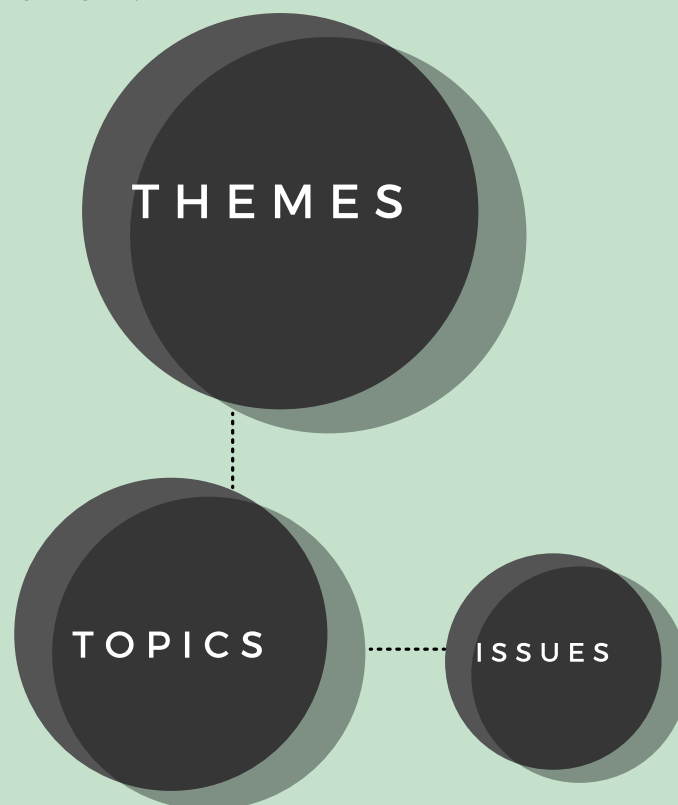


Fig 2: News analysis framework developed to study news articles on the subject of electricity in TN

IV. LIMITATION

The news articles analysed for the study are limited to the items retrieved through the Google News search engine for the period 2009 - 2018. This does not cover newspapers in the regional language (Tamil), magazines, local/area newspapers or print media that do not have an online platform.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

V.a. Patterns & trends in media coverage

1. Electricity themes, topics & issues covered: News articles on ‘electricity’ in TN carry vital information ranging from power shutdown notifications to public hearing invites and tariff revision petitions. A review of 632 news articles published between 2009 and 2018 suggests that TN electricity news covered around 40 topics and 18 related issues under 10 broad themes such as (i) Politics & Administration, (ii) Tariff & regulations, (iii) Conventional power generation and capacity addition, (iv) Infrastructure development & technological advances, (v) Government schemes & Policies, (vi) Demand side management & energy efficiency (DSM & EE),⁵ (vii) Power situation & general news, (viii) Finance, (ix) Disaster: damages & updates, (x) Renewable energy.

The various electricity topics and related issues as mapped under the 10 broad themes are as given below:

01 POLITICS & ADMINISTRATION

- 1.1. Free power to farmers & subsidy
 - Related issues: 1.1.a. Administrative issues with exploring direct bank transfer*
 - 1.1.b. Political discourse around introduction of subsidies and schemes*
 - 1.1.c. Lack of metering for agriculture & hut connections*
- 1.2. Staff situation and recruitment at TANGEDCO
 - Related issues: 1.2.a. TANGEDCO Short staffed*
 - 1.2.b. Discontent among contract staff*
 - 1.2.c. Staff demands for wage hike*

02 TARIFF & REGULATIONS

- 2.1. Tariff orders issued
 - Related issue: 2.1.a. Consumers' discontent around tariff hike*
- 2.2. Solar tariff order
 - Related issue: 2.2.a. Industry discontent & sore developers*
- 2.3. Judicial cases
 - Related issue: 2.3.a. Conventional power vs renewable power*

03 CONVENTIONAL POWER GENERATION & CAPACITY ADDITION

- 3.1. Increase in power generation
- 3.2. Power plant acquisition
- 3.2. Coal block allocation
- 3.4. Expansion of power programmes
 - Related issue: 3.a. Increase in demand for power*

⁵ *Demand Side Management & Energy Efficiency (DSM & EE): Intervention that focuses on influencing consumer's ability and willingness to reduce electricity consumption*



04 INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT & TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

- 4.1. Installation of street lights
- 4.2. Installation of underground/overhead power cables
- 4.3. Construction of transmission lines
- 4.4. Increase in substations
- 4.5. Introduction of Smart meters
Related issue: 4.a. Need to strengthen electricity infrastructure
- 4.6. Launch of helplines
- 4.7. Tie-ups to promote online bill payment
- 4.8. Online service for power consumers
Related issue: 4.b. Need for improved access to complaint mechanisms, information & bill payment

05 GOVT. SCHEMES/POLICY

- 5.1. UDAY Scheme
Related issue: 5.1.a. Discom's ⁶debt cycle
- 5.2. Saubhagya Scheme
Related issue: 5.2.a. Need for rural electrification
- 5.3. Solar Policy 2012
- 5.4. Solar pumpset scheme
Related issues: 5.b. Power crisis & need for transition to renewables

07 POWER SITUATION & GENERAL NEWS

- 7.1. Power cuts
Related issues: 7.1.a. Power crisis
- 7.2. Deaths due to electrocution
Related issues: 7.2.a. Poor infrastructure & lack of maintenance
- 7.3. Updates on holidays and regular maintenance shutdowns
- 7.4. Electricity thefts
Related issues: 7.4.a. Lack of law enforcement against the crime of electricity theft

09 DISASTER: DAMAGES & UPDATES

- 9.1. Deaths due to electrocution
- 9.2. Infrastructure damages
- 9.3. Power shutdowns and restoration work
Related issues: 9.a. Cyclones & lack of quality infrastructure to withstand the cyclones

06 DEMAND SIDE MANAGEMENT & ENERGY EFFICIENCY

- 6.1. Load shedding
- 6.2. Promotion of LED bulbs
- 6.3. Claims & Discourse: Power demand/power surplus
Related issues: 6.a. Power crisis & Increase in demand for power

08 FINANCE

- 8.1. Regulatory asset
- 8.2. Revenue loss
- 8.3. Power purchase cost
Related issues: 8.a. Discom's debt cycle
- 8.4. Open access
Related issues: 8.4.a. Tariff & non-tariff barriers to retail open access. Eg. Open Access Charges, Cross Subsidy Surcharge, provisions related to restrictions and special conditions imposed on consumers,

10 RENEWABLE ENERGY

- 10.1. Solar energy - capacity addition/installation/costs
- 10.2. energy - capacity addition/installation/costs
- 10.3. Ocean and biogas energy
- 10.4. Renewable Portfolio Obligation
- 10.5. Grid evacuation
Related issues: 10.a. Power crisis & need for transition to renewables (5.b)

Media reporting of electricity themes reflect a coverage of topical issues consistent with the institutional, legal, regulatory, financial, and administrative situation in the state's electricity sector, during the period. Further, it could be observed that themes such as renewable energy and politics & administration had cross-cutting relationships with other themes including finance, tariff & regulations, conventional power generation & capacity addition, infrastructure development & technical advances and government schemes & policy.

⁶ Discom: Electricity distribution companies (in India)

2. Dominant themes & corresponding timelines: News articles were reviewed to study the patterns of media coverage extended to the subject of electricity in TN. It was observed that among all the electricity themes identified in the study, select themes were dominant during a given year/period.



Fig 3: Dominant electricity themes written about in TN news media and the corresponding year of coverage between 2009 and 2018

In years 2009 and 2010, the focus of news media was largely on institutional finance, conventional power generation and capacity addition due to the restructuring⁷ of the state electricity board that was being initiated at the time, in accordance with the Electricity Act, 2003.

⁷ *Restructuring*: Measures taken by the State Discoms and State Government for achieving financial turnaround by restructuring their debt with support through a transitional finance mechanism by Central Government.

Between 2011 and 2013, news media largely covered electricity tariff and regulations which can be linked to the tariff hike proposed by Tamil Nadu Electricity Regulatory Commission (TNERC) during the said period.⁸ Apart from tariff and regulations, the other dominant theme during 2012-13 was ‘power situation and general news’ which can be linked to the extensive power cuts, and deepening power crisis⁹ that Tamil Nadu was facing in the years 2012 and 2013.

Post the 2012-13 power shortage, TN news media could be seen as increasingly interested and focused on renewable energy. From 2014 through 2018, renewable energy was a dominant electricity theme consistently captured across news platforms. This reflects media understanding of the electricity crisis and the need to cover alternative sources of energy and its ensuing issues.

Government schemes and policies significantly influenced media coverage of electricity topics in the years 2016, 2017 and 2018. (i) In 2016, news sources largely covered UDAY¹⁰ in light of Tamil Nadu joining the Central Government scheme, (ii) In 2017, news articles focused on the tariff order on solar power¹¹ as issued by TNERC and, (iii) In 2018, the Solar Pumpset Scheme¹² was highlighted and analysed under electricity news.

Additionally, in years 2016 and 2018, the electricity infrastructure damages and electrocution deaths caused during cyclones Vardah and Gaja respectively were widely reported. Electricity news around the disasters were followed-up with updates on restoration work carried out by Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO).

⁸ *Three tariff orders* were issued by Tamil Nadu Electricity Regulatory Commission between 2011 and 2013

⁹ *TN Power crisis*: During 2012-13 the power supply-demand gap was widening. While demand was 12,000 MW, the availability was only to the tune of 8,000 MW leaving a gap of 4,000 MW to the State.


¹⁰ *UDAY Scheme*: Ujjwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana is the financial turnaround and revival package for electricity distribution companies of India initiated by the Government of India with the intent to find a permanent solution to the financial mess that the power distribution is in


¹¹ *Tariff order on Solar power*: Issued by TNERC in 2017


¹² *Solar pumpset scheme*: The Kusum (Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan) scheme was announced in 2008 to provide for 17.5 lakh off grid solar pumps in the first phase.


3. Commonalities & Gaps:

(i) Themes, topics & issues


-  **Commonalities:** Most electricity themes and topics covered by TN news media were largely influenced by a specific issue or development in the electricity sector during the year/period.

-  Although most themes identified reflect a topical coverage, renewable energy could be seen as the dominant theme that was consistently captured, post 2013.


-  In recent years, newer electricity topics were covered across news sources:
 - ‘Rural electrification’ which was a largely neglected topic until 2017, saw wide-spread reporting and analysis after the announcement of “Saubhagya Scheme - Electricity to all”
 - Solar energy and wind energy were the only renewable topics focused on between 2009 - 2016; whereas 2017 and 2018 saw articles being written on other renewable topics such as ocean energy & biogas energy.

-  Issues such as the discom’s debt cycle and poor infrastructure had an influence that was limited to a select set of themes:
 - Discom’s debt cycle could be seen as the issue that influenced discourse around electricity themes such as finance and government schemes/policy.
 - The issue of poor infrastructure could be seen influencing themes such as infrastructure development & technical advances and DSM & EE.

¹³ *Saubhagya scheme: The central government scheme was launched in 2017 provide energy access to all by last mile connectivity and electricity connections to all remaining un-electrified households in rural as well as urban areas to achieve universal household electrification in the country. .*

 But, power crisis (2009-13) and the increase in demand for power could be identified as the most prominent issues that impacted several topics across multiple themes.


- The themes impacted by the prominent issues identified above include conventional power generation and capacity addition, infrastructure development & technological advances, government schemes & policies, DSM & EE, power situation & general news, and renewable energy.


 *Gaps:* Although a wide range of themes, corresponding topics and related issues have been captured across news sources, a few pertinent themes were sidelined or neglected. For example,

- TN news media has seldom approached electricity topics from the perspective of climate change and mitigation. Even though a significant portion of news coverage was dedicated to clean energy and power crisis, they were hardly connected to the phenomenon of climate change.
- Additionally, it was observed that electricity news narratives also missed linkages to gender and energy.

This reflects a rather myopic focus on electricity issues in hand and suggests that there is a strong need to get a bird's eye view and connect them to a broader matrix of such relevant themes.

(i) Stakeholder focus

 The stakeholders portrayed in the news were mainly TANGEDCO/TANTRANSCO, Government of Tamil Nadu, TNERC and Industries.

 It was identified that there has been a lack of significant representation from academia, research & consultancy firms focused on energy/electricity, and civil society organisations.

V.b. Extent of media coverage

1. Prominent news sources: Among the 53 news sources studied, the top five news sources that published most number of news articles include, The Hindu, The Times of India, The New Indian Express, Economic Times and The Hindu Businessline. The Hindu and The Times of India published a significant number of articles outlining electricity topics and related issues, adding up to 40% of the articles reviewed between 2009 and 2018.

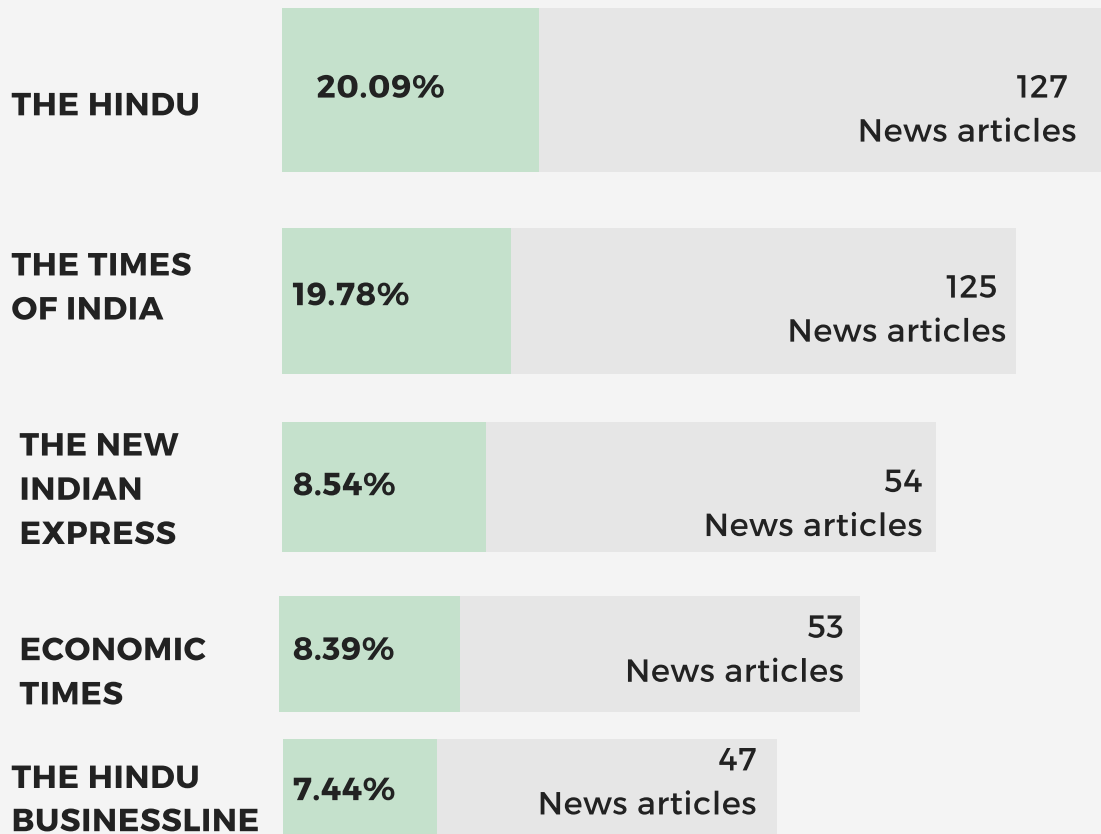


Fig 4: Top 5 news sources covering the subject of electricity in Tamil Nadu

With the exception of a few opinion pieces published in The Hindu Businessline and some human interest stories captured on digital news platforms, most articles published on the subject of electricity were either interviews of relevant officials and politicians or highlights of the power situation in the state.

2. Number of news articles: Over the years, there has been a steady increase in media reporting of electricity topics and related issues. The number of news articles from 2009 to 2015 have increased marginally, whereas the number of news articles have seen a multi-fold increase in the years 2016 and 2017.

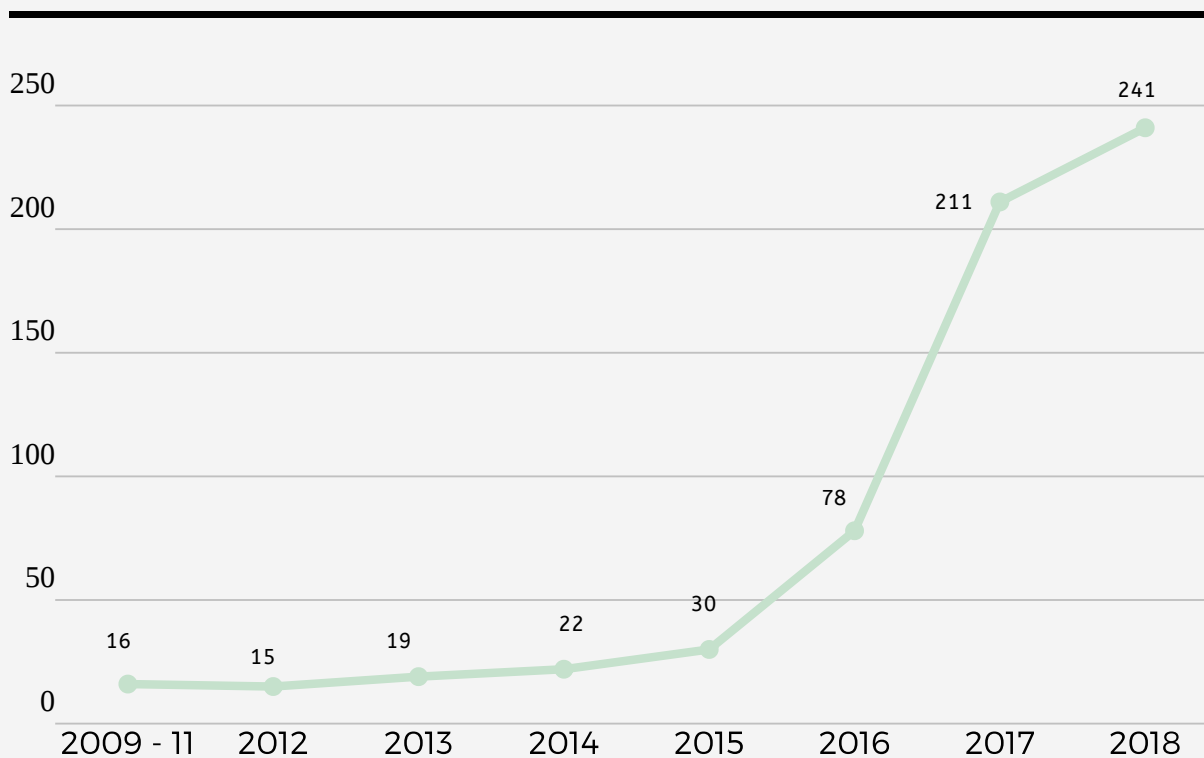


Fig 5: Number of news articles on electricity topics in TN, during 2009-18

1 In 2016, the number of news articles on electricity was over twice as many as in 2015.

3 From 2016 to 2017, articles on electricity topics saw a 171% increase in number.

2 In 2017, the number of news articles had risen to nearly three times the number of news articles in 2016.

4 Subsequently, from 2017 to 2018, articles on electricity topics saw a 14% increase in number.

3. Factors influencing the extent of media coverage:

- (i) Increased interest and focus on renewable energy;
- &
- (ii) Increase in number of digital news platforms reporting on electricity

(i) Increased interest and focus on renewable energy, contributing to an overall increase in the extent of media reporting of electricity.

In addition to being the dominant theme that was consistently captured since 2013,¹⁴ renewable energy was also identified as the most written about theme during 2009-18.

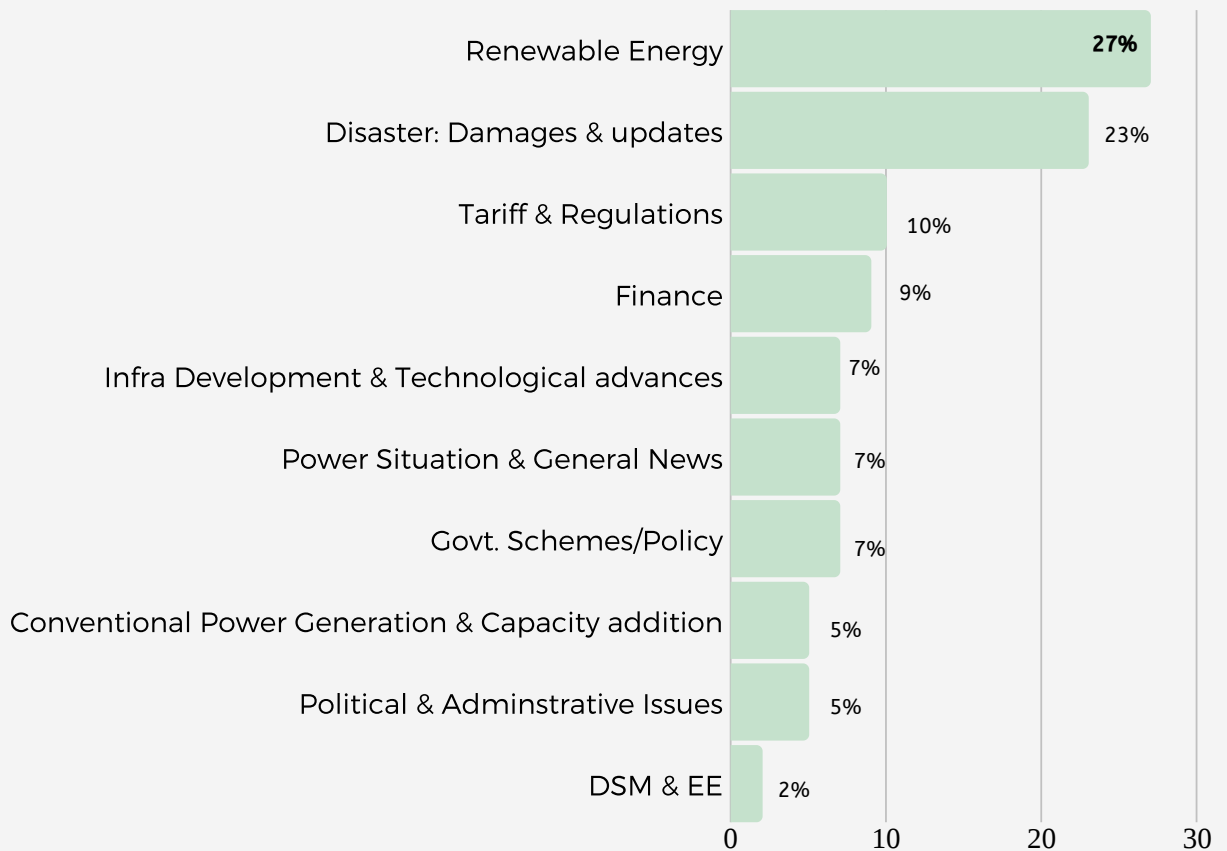


Fig 6: Electricity themes and the extent of media coverage in TN during 2009-18

¹⁴ Figure 3 highlights dominant electricity themes written about in TN news media and the corresponding year of coverage between 2009 and 2018.

Figure 6, represents the extent of media coverage extended to the 10 broad electricity themes identified in the study. Renewable energy (27%) and damage caused by disasters and updates around it (23%) were prominent electricity themes covered by TN news media. Within renewables, solar energy made for 54% of the news content followed by wind energy (21%). Other topics covered under renewables include (i) grid evacuation (8%), (ii) Renewable Portfolio Obligation requiring purchase by the distribution companies (15%) and (iii) Ocean & Biogas energy (2%).

Apart from the prominent themes, tariffs and regulations, finance, infrastructure development and Government schemes and policies were covered as and when there were relevant updates or issues identified. But, a pertinent theme such as demand side management and energy efficiency (DSM & EE) was largely neglected or insufficiently covered (2%). Reporting on DSM and EE was limited to highlighting the LED bulbs distributed under Ujala scheme¹⁵ and the LED street lamps installed in different regions of the state.

(ii) Increase in number of digital news platforms reporting on electricity, contributing to an overall increase in the extent of media reporting of electricity.

In recent years, electricity reporting has been extending beyond conventional print media. While all news articles on electricity topics during 2009 - 10 were published on print media, 30% of the news articles were released on digital media platforms during 2017-18.

Such platforms include Livemint, The Better India, Citizen Matters, Down To Earth, Your Story, Energy Digital, Energy Infrapost, The Wire, Clean Technica, Renewables Now, etc.

¹⁵ *Ujala scheme: Launched in 2015, the Unnat Jyoti by Affordable LEDs for All (UJALA), is a domestic lighting programme developed to address India's high cost of electrification and high emissions from inefficient lighting.*

V.c. Social media reach: An observation

News articles across print and digital platforms were reviewed through CrowdTangle, a social media analysis tool to identify the reach of articles on ‘electricity’ across social media platforms.

Findings suggest that human interest stories focused on clean energy garnered better/wider reach on social media. It was also observed that news articles on digital platforms were more likely to feature such human interest stories.

Example:

Among the 632 news articles reviewed for the study, the success story of Mr. Suresh, who effectively adopted solar energy, garnered the most reach on social media with 52 shares across social media platforms, 49,119 likes and comments in social media groups with an audience of 8, 302,683.

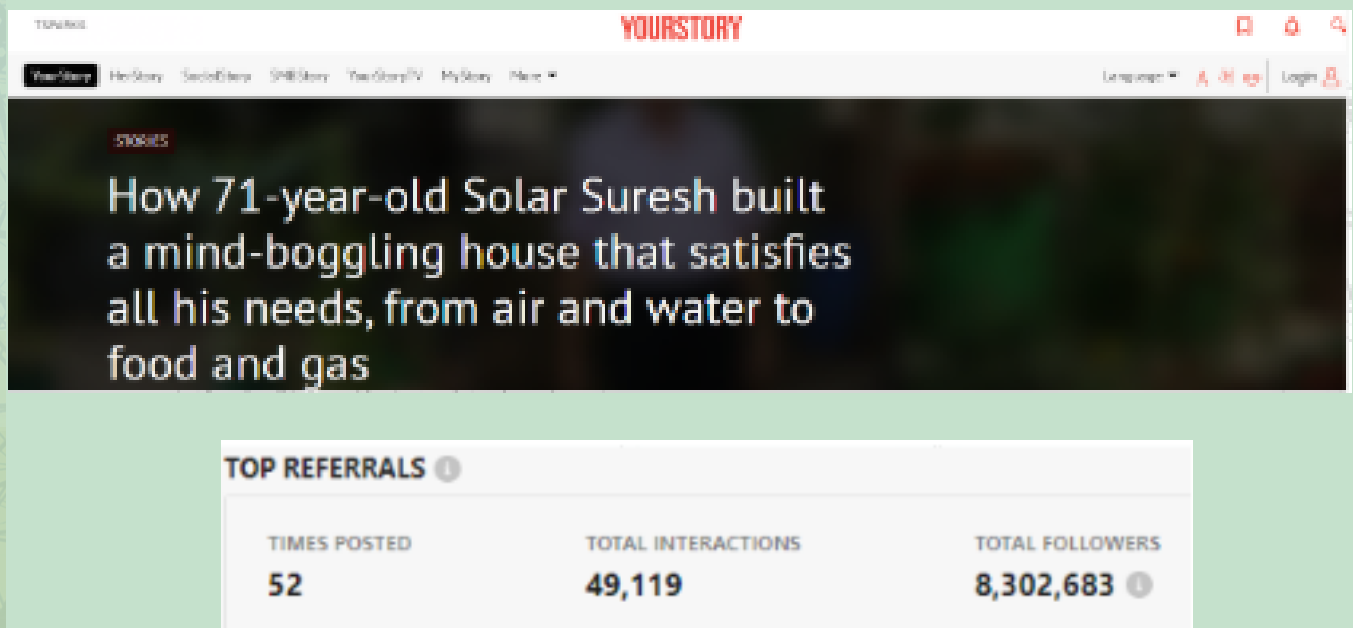


Fig 7: Social media reach of the article on Solar Suresh as retrieved through CrowdTangle

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

01



With the exception of select opinion pieces, media coverage of electricity topics and related issues are largely focused on the power situation in the state or interviews of electricity officials and policymakers. More opinion pieces with an analytical approach and increased level of information dissemination can improve the quality of discourse around electricity topics.

02



thorough manner of presenting electricity topics with the views of a broader set of stakeholders, including academia, research & consultancy firms focused on energy/electricity, and civil society organisations is likely to benefit the readership even more.

03



Additionally, focusing on pertinent electricity topics such as (i) demand side management and energy efficiency (DSM & EE), (ii) gender and electricity, and (iii) climate change will provide a holistic view of the electricity sector and its issues.

04



Reporting on clean energy topics with more human interest stories can help reach a wider set of audience and ensure greater impact.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study suggests that news media in Tamil Nadu has been reporting more on electricity, since 2015 and exploring newer electricity topics, since 2017. Further, it has been identified that a wide range of electricity topics and related issues have been covered across news sources and that the coverage on renewable energy has been steadily increasing. This suggests a significant improvement in media coverage of electricity topics in Tamil Nadu.

Yet, there is a strong need to further explore ways to (i) enhance the reach, understanding, and discourse around these topics, and (ii) provide a holistic view of the electricity sector with due focus on pertinent electricity issues and broader set of stakeholders. In summary, given the influence of news media and its agenda-setting role in public sphere, comprehensive reporting of electricity topics and related issues will go a long way in keeping electricity consumers informed, shaping their opinions and in turn enhancing consumer participation in the decision making process.