

Presentation of preventive measures in Sinhala television news telecasts during the second wave of Covid-19 in Sri Lanka; an observational infoveillance study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The promotion of preventive measures is regarded as the most effective public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A significant proportion of Sri Lankans rely on television to access news. This Infoveillance study was done to assess the content related to preventive measures for Covid-19, included in Sinhalese television news telecasts.

Methods: An observational infoveillance study was conducted by performing both quantitative and content analyses of Covid-19 related content included in Sinhala prime time news-bulletins in four of the mostly viewed television channels within a period of two weeks.

Results: Movement restriction as a preventive measure was illustrated with brief descriptions in 25.0% of the news bulletins. However, highlighting the importance of wearing face masks (7.1%), social distancing (8.9%), hand washing (8.9%) and avoiding gatherings and crowded places (16.1%) were low. A variation of reporting was noted among the four different channels. The content analysis has revealed a lack of objective descriptions of contact tracing and graphical illustrations of epidemiology.

Conclusions: News bulletins generally fail to provide the public with complete and adequate information about preventive measures. A discrepancy was noted in the volumes of reporting of different preventive strategies and a variation of reporting was noted among the four different channels.

Keywords: Covid-19, infoveillance, news, preventive measures.

Introduction

Informing and education are the two key aspects of good journalism (1). In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of media in educating the public became crucial, because media has a strong power to influence individual attitudes and behaviour regarding a variety of health issues (2). There is a general expectation that the media will provide accurate, unbiased and complete information (3). On the other hand, if erroneously presented, media portrayals of health issues may misinform audiences and reinforce undesirable perceptions(4).

Promoting key preventive measures like proper hand hygiene, maintaining adequate social distance, wearing face masks and restricting movements is regarded as the most effective public health responses to control the pandemic. Therefore, media has an important role to disseminate these key preventive measures to the public using every possible opportunity. However, the role of media amidst the current Covid-19 pandemic has often been criticized(5).

Adequate and consistent risk communication facilitates the delivery of effective safety instructions to the public. It also has favourable impacts on individual and community level responses to information. With the rising concern about diseases and health threatening environments, attention of media towards diverse health issues has increased over the last two decades(6).

News bulletins on TV channels make a significant impact on shaping the public opinion and awareness on Covid-19, as those are viewed by a large proportion of the population. Though more air time has been allocated for Covid-19 - related discussions and programmes, news bulletins are subjected to the most amount of public attention. This is evident as higher viewer ratings are reported during news telecasts rather than other programmes. Furthermore, higher *YouTube* views for news telecasts have been noted. Therefore, TV news is often used as a popular channel for communicating health information to the public(7-9).

Despite the crucial role news media plays with regard to disseminating public health messages in order to promote health behavior related to

Covid-19 (6), no study has been published so far to examine the presentation of health messages in Sri Lankan TV news. However, the potential utility of news telecasts in strengthening the public health response is not adequately used and some reporting-instances are insufficient-in-news value, ethically-incongruent, and inconsistent in relation to certain aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic(10).

The aim of this infoveillance study was to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the content related to preventive measures for Covid-19 included in Sinhala television news telecasts in four of the mostly viewed television channels according to viewer ratings.

Methods

This observational infoveillance study consisted of both quantitative and content analyses of Covid-19 - related content included Sinhala prime time news-bulletins of four selected TV channels in Sri Lanka over a period of 14 days starting from 28th October 2020, which was the early part of the second wave of the local Covid-19 pandemic. Four leading private television channels were chosen based on viewer ratings. Fifty-six news bulletins were reviewed for the study.

The full length of each news bulletin was reviewed from the live telecasts. Only the content read by newsreaders and shown in the main panel including both headlines and summary, were considered in the analysis. Any content shown during commercial breaks or appeared in the news bar (bottom line) were excluded.

In the quantitative analysis; inclusion, adequacy and accuracy of reporting five key preventive measures of Covid-19 were assessed. The five measures were chosen based on guidelines of World Health Organization (WHO), which included hand washing, wearing facemasks, social distancing, movement restrictions and avoiding gatherings. For the ascertainment of data, a checklist was prepared based on international and local guidelines.

Two raters, who are the undergraduates in the health sciences degrees, assessed the news bulletins. The selected channels were divided among the

raters for the assessments. The principal investigator provided a training to the raters and a list of operational definitions of variables were given to ensure consistency of data collection. Continuous supervision was done to ensure the quality of data. Each rater reviewed 28 news bulletins. The reliability of the assessments was evaluated by calculating Kappa values. Five randomly selected bulletins were exchanged between the two of them and re-rated. Satisfactory Kappa values were noted.

The qualitative content analysis was done by applying an inductive manual coding approach to key themes generated under the selected preventive measures. Data were collected to ascertain whether the news telecast presented the particular preventive measure. Verbal description with or without showing graphics was considered as presenting the particular preventive measure. Statements or description by either the newsreader or by any other person appearing in the news were considered. At least one complete sentence was considered as a 'presentation'. Additionally, the content was noted down including references to graphics for the purpose of content analysis. Content analysis was done to identify key themes elicited.

Findings of the quantitative component were presented with descriptive statistics. All information collected for this study was from public domains, and the study did not involve any interaction with users.

Results

A total of 56 news bulletins were reviewed during the study period.

Figure 1 shows cumulative reporting of the five key preventive measures.

Movement restriction was illustrated with brief descriptions in 25.0% of news bulletins.

However, reporting of the importance of wearing face masks (7.1%), social distancing (8.9%) hand washing (8.9%) and avoiding gatherings and crowded places (16.1%) was low.

A variation of reporting was noted among the four different channels and results are presented in Figure 2.

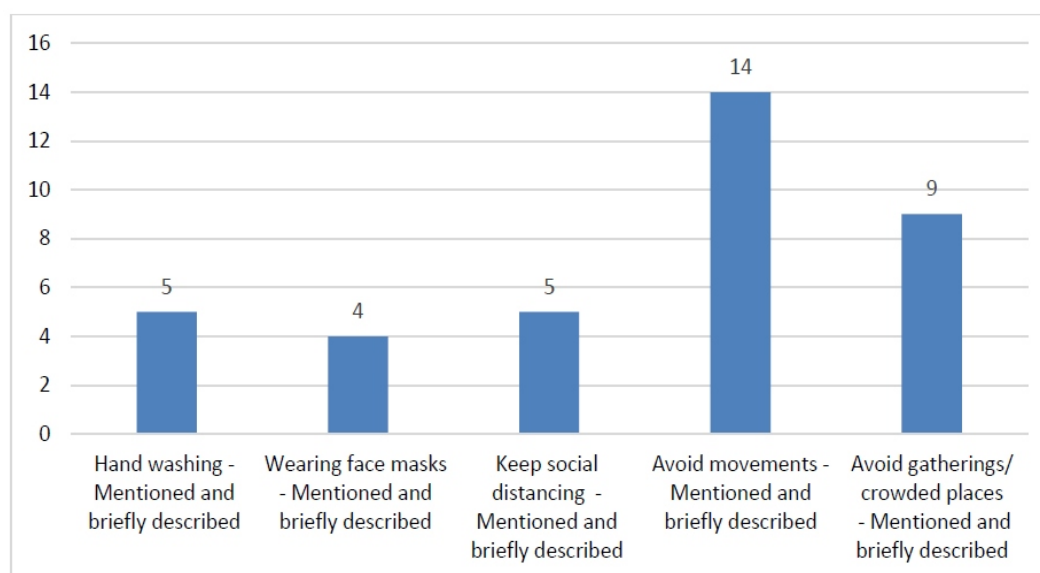


Figure 1: Cumulative reporting of five key preventive measures

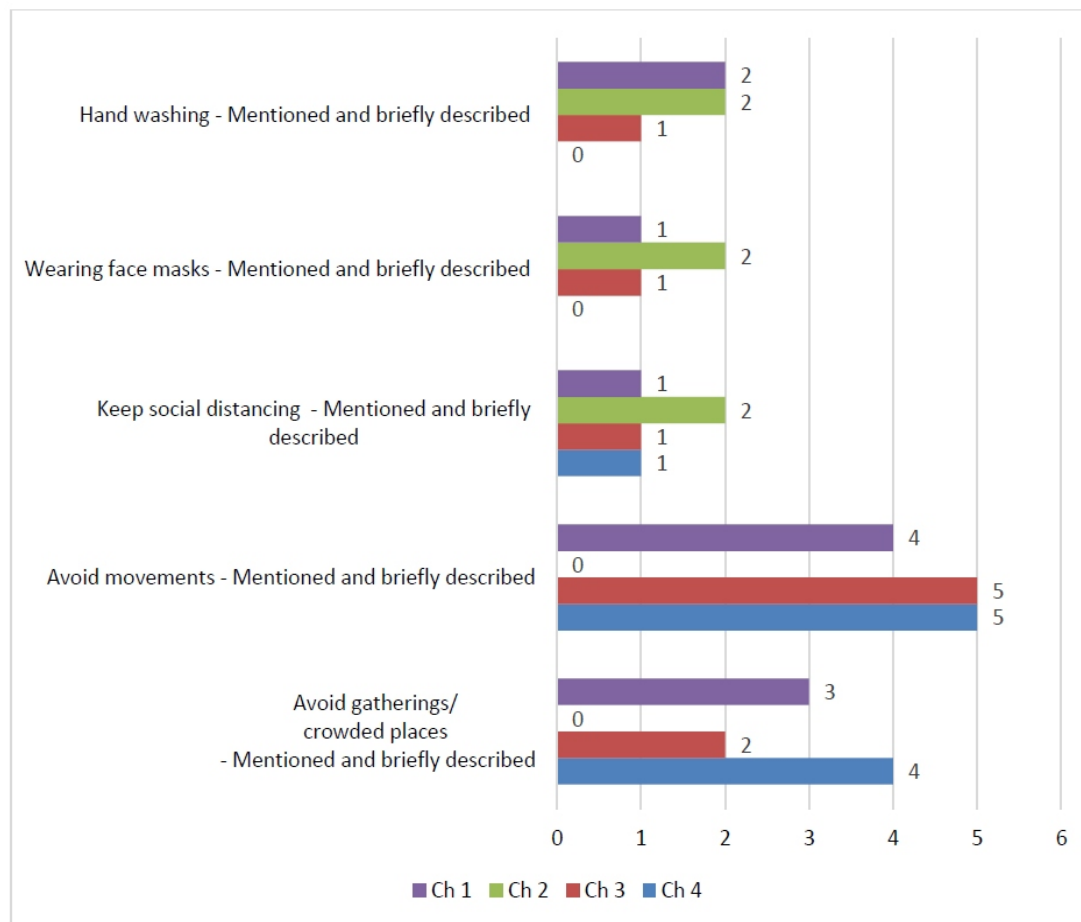


Figure 2: Reporting of five key preventive measures in each channel

Certain channels did not report particular preventive measures at all. Channel 4 did not present hand washing and wearing face masks at all. Similarly, Channel 2 did not indicate any information about avoiding movements and avoiding public gatherings.

In addition to the above data, the following findings were also highlighted during the content analysis:

Only one showed of standards of an ideal face mask and correct technique of wearing was shown in one channel. Only two depictions of graphical representation of hand washing were seen. However, on both occasions the technique was compatible with the WHO guidance.

In all the occasions that dealt with social distancing, the minimum safe distance was mentioned. Most of the time, appeared and described the importance of preventive measures. References were attributed to politicians making statements.

Objective verification of certain preventive measures was not adequately done (especially in relation to avoiding social gatherings).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first infoveillance study which has explored this particular phenomenon. Our results indicate relatively lower levels of attention towards presenting key preventive measures during Sinhala news bulletins in TV channels. The utility of news as a medium of delivering health messages has been proven in other settings (6, 9). The high viewership of news in comparison to other television programmes makes news an ideal vehicle of delivering health messages to prevent Covid-19. However, a general lack of priority in promoting basic health education messages is noted. This is an unfavourable situation, as it seems the key messages are not adequately

disseminated to the public. Wang & Gantz (2007), have stressed the importance of repeated portrayal of specific preventive strategies in media during a pandemic (9). Television health news can maximize the adoption of health behaviour by raising viewers' attention and increasing viewers' confidence.

The illustration with graphical clips of key preventive measures like hand washing technique on television is known to promote the behaviour (11). TV health news stories tend to share narrative messages incorporated with visual presentations. In this regard, it is probable that TV health news stories have powerful persuasive effects on viewers' cognition and/or behaviours (6). Taylor and Thompson (1982,) noted that visual supplements with concrete and specific language make messages highly vivid in viewers' perceptions (12). Messages with these characteristics have a persuasive power since the audience becomes attentive to the messages, which, in turn, contributes to a lasting behavioral change (11).

A discrepancy was noted within the relative times allocated for each preventive strategy. Relatively more illustrations were detected for movement restrictions. Hong (2011), highlighted the importance of repeated portrayal of key health messages in obtaining high attention and ensuring information retention among general public. However, hand washing was not adequately displayed. Perception of relative values of different preventive strategies determines these time allocations. However hand washing is regarded as the most cost effective public health intervention to prevent the spread of Covid-19 (13). It will be helpful in preventing many other communicable diseases as well. The selection of the right type of facemask and wearing it in the proper manner is also important to ensure the correct practice (14). Television can play a crucial role in promoting knowledge and inculcating right practices in using face masks.

Rabbi & Dey (2013), reported poor knowledge and practices of hand washing among public in low- and middle-income countries. This warrants an urgent need of making people aware (15). Providing adequate knowledge and inculcating correct practices are important as both are essential in ensuring sustainable behavioural change. News bulletins can play significant roles in this context.

Cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity of information is very important as the respective health messages should be delivered in a culturally acceptable manner. Acceptance can be ensured only if they are delivered in such a manner (16).

When disseminating information about preventive strategies, ensuring accuracy and consistency are of paramount importance. Health stories in mass media often originate with news releases from official organizations. Tailoring news releases to a particular mass media outlet increases the possibility that the release will result in a published story (17). This provides an important implication in making key health messages 'marketable' through mass media. However, Frost, (2020) has noted a plethora of low-quality news with misrepresentations, falsifications and questionable authenticity, circulating in mainstream media (1). When considering consistency, following objective criteria and reference to accurate sources are important. It seems all the channels followed recommended guidelines in reporting preventive measures and it was commendable. Hong (2011), noted perceived severity, response efficacy and self-efficacy as the key factors in influencing message acceptance and health consciousness while viewing television news (6).

There were a few limitations of this study. As the study was conducted over a period of 2 weeks, assessing temporal relationships and trends of reporting was not possible. The selection of only Sinhala news bulletins also restricted the generalizability. Though the inter-rater reliability was satisfactory, the influence added by the inter-rater variation cannot be completely excluded.

Conclusions

Sinhala news bulletins on Sri Lankan TV channels must focus more on providing the public with complete, adequate and accurate information about preventive measures, as the current provisions of such information is suboptimal. A discrepancy was noted in the volumes of reporting of different preventive strategies and a variation of reporting was noted among the four different channels. The objective verification of certain preventive measures was not adequately done. More studies are warranted with in-depth content analysis of

news telecasts to generate better evidence to guide media practices to strengthen the preventive actions against Covid-19.

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