

Media Influence on Public Perception of the Mekedatu Project within the Cauvery Water Dispute: A Primary Survey-Based Study in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

The Mekedatu project has once again become a major talking point in Karnataka, especially after recent court updates and political statements about the Cauvery water dispute. People keep hearing different things on TV, social media, and online news, and this study tries to understand how all that information actually shapes their views. Using survey responses from people across Karnataka, the research looks at two things: whether frequent media exposure influences their attitude, and whether people who depend on different media sources think differently about the project. The results showed a strong link between how much media people consume and how strongly they feel about Mekedatu. The ANOVA test also found clear differences between traditional and digital media users, with online and social media users showing stronger opinions overall. These findings suggest that the type of media people follow plays a big role in shaping their understanding of the project and the wider Cauvery issue.

Keywords:

Mekedatu Project, Media Exposure, Public Attitude, Cauvery Water Dispute, Media Influence.

INTRODUCTION

The Mekedatu project has become one of the most discussed water-related issues in Karnataka, mainly because it is connected to the long-running Cauvery water dispute. The project has received renewed attention due to recent legal and political developments, making it a prominent topic in public conversations. As news spreads through television, online platforms, and especially social media, people are exposed to different opinions, arguments, and interpretations. This constant flow of information shapes how citizens understand the project and its possible impact. Youth audiences, who are more active on digital platforms, tend to form their views based on the media they consume. However, very little research has explored how media exposure actually influences public perception of Mekedatu. Most discussions remain political or technical, leaving a clear academic gap. This study aims to understand how media shapes awareness and attitudes, and whether different media sources influence people in different ways. The findings will help explain how public opinion develops in large infrastructure debates.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Mekedatu project has become one of the most debated water-infrastructure proposals in Karnataka, mainly because it is closely tied to the long-standing Cauvery water dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Recent political announcements, legal developments, and media reporting have brought the issue back into public discussion. For instance, the Supreme Court's observations that Tamil Nadu's objections were "premature" triggered renewed attention across news platforms (Hindustan Times, 2025). State leaders have also frequently used media statements to communicate progress, such as the submission of a fresh Detailed Project Report to the Centre (Hindustan Times, 2025). Media coverage often mixes legal updates, political reactions, and public sentiment, shaping how people interpret the intentions and implications of the project (The Print, 2025).

At the same time, simplified explainers and constant digital updates have made the topic more visible to the youth, especially through online news and social media platforms (News Bytes, 2025). Expert commentary in major newspapers has also highlighted interstate negotiations and environmental concerns, further influencing public opinion (Times of India, 2025). Academic studies on Cauvery-related issues show that media framing significantly impacts public understanding, emotional responses, and perceptions of responsibility during water conflicts (Jenin

Raj & Nandakumar, 2025; Chandrasekharan, 2025). Broader research on river-link projects indicates that media narratives often emphasize themes such as development, environmental risk, and political contestation (Singh et al., 2025).

However, despite the project's prominence in political discourse and news cycles, there is very limited scholarly research specifically examining how media exposure influences public perception of Mekedatu. Government documents provide technical details (Government of Karnataka, 2019), and earlier framing studies of the Cauvery dispute offer historical insights (Velayutham, 2019), but they do not address contemporary media platforms such as social media, which play a major role today. This lack of focused academic work highlights the need for primary research that explores how different media sources shape people's awareness, attitudes, and interpretations of the Mekedatu project in Karnataka.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since very few academic studies have directly examined public perception and media influence on the Mekedatu issue, this review also includes credible newspaper articles, government documents, and other relevant online sources to provide a broader understanding.

1. **The Print (2025)** explains how the Supreme Court removed a procedural hurdle for the Mekedatu project while stopping short of granting full approval. The report blends legal updates with political messaging, shaping how the public interprets the dispute. It portrays Mekedatu as both a developmental aspiration and a sensitive political issue. However, the article offers limited technical or environmental detail.
2. **Hindustan Times (2025)** discusses Karnataka's decision to submit a fresh Detailed Project Report after the Supreme Court termed Tamil Nadu's objection premature. The article highlights how political leaders use media coverage to project administrative progress and influence public opinion. This helps shape awareness among citizens, especially youth. A limitation is the minimal focus on ecological concerns.
3. **News Bytes (2025)** offers a simple explainer on why Mekedatu has returned to public debate, summarizing recent political and judicial developments. Its youth-friendly, easy-to-read style helps general readers understand the issue quickly. While this builds public awareness, the explanation sometimes oversimplifies hydrological and technical complexities.

4. **Hindustan Times (2025)** reports on the Supreme Court's remark that Tamil Nadu's challenge to Mekedatu was premature until expert review is completed. Media coverage of courtroom proceedings often influences how people perceive fairness in interstate disputes. The report amplifies political reactions, shaping public trust in the legal process. It provides little insight into scientific or environmental aspects.

5. **Times of India (2025)** presents expert opinions explaining that Karnataka must secure Tamil Nadu's cooperation to advance the Mekedatu project. The article emphasizes negotiation, environmental clearance, and political communication as major hurdles. It highlights how expert voices shape public expectations. However, it lacks perspectives from local communities directly affected by the project.

6. **Drishti IAS (2025)** provides a neutral summary of the Mekedatu project, explaining its intended benefits and reasons behind Tamil Nadu's opposition. The source is useful for creating awareness-related research tools because it presents information clearly and objectively. Its limitation is that it is not peer-reviewed, reducing its academic depth.

7. **Vajiram & Ravi (2024)** offer an examination-style overview of the Mekedatu reservoir project, covering its technical, political, and environmental aspects. The concise format helps in understanding the broader context of the dispute. However, the analysis remains descriptive and does not offer deeper academic interpretation.

8. **Wikipedia (2025)** compiles commonly known information about Mekedatu, including geography, political background, and public debate. It is helpful for gaining initial orientation, especially for new readers. The limitation is potential inconsistency because the platform allows open edits.

9. **Singh, Hansen & Birkenholtz (2025)** analyze how Indian media frames large water-infrastructure projects using topic modelling. Their study identifies themes of development, politics, and environmental concern, offering a useful framework for analyzing Mekedatu media narratives. Although the study does not focus on Mekedatu, its method is highly transferable to similar disputes.

10. **Jenin Raj & Nandakumar (2025)** examine how media influences social behaviour during the Cauvery water crisis. Their findings show that emotionally charged reporting can heighten public tension and shape regional sentiment. This supports the idea that media exposure strongly influences

public attitude. The study's limitation is that it focuses on crisis moments rather than long-term perception.

11. **Chandrasekharan (2025)** analyzes how newspaper editorials frame the Cauvery conflict by assigning responsibility and proposing solutions. The study explains how editorial framing shapes public understanding of water disputes. A drawback is the absence of television and social media analysis, which limits its relevance to current digital conditions.

12. **Government of Karnataka (2019)** provides a pre-feasibility report detailing geological, hydrological, and technical aspects of the Mekedatu project. It offers valuable technical background essential for understanding the project's goals and controversies. Its main limitation is that it presents only the official planning perspective without independent evaluation.

13. **Richards & Singh (2004)** examine India's institutional structures for resolving interstate water disputes, highlighting legal, political, and administrative challenges. Their work provides essential background for understanding why projects like Mekedatu face prolonged delays. Its limitation is that it predates modern environmental activism and digital media influence.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the relationship between media exposure frequency and public attitude toward the Mekedatu Project.
2. To determine whether public attitude toward the Mekedatu Project differs across categories of media users (TV, newspapers, online news, social media).

HYPOTHESES

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between media exposure and public attitude.

H1₁: There is a significant positive relationship between media exposure and public attitude.

H0₂: There is no significant difference in public attitude across media-source groups.

H1₂: There is a significant difference in public attitude across media-source groups.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research follows a quantitative approach using primary data collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic details, media-usage patterns, and Likert-

scale items measuring exposure and perception. The study used correlation analysis to examine the relationship between media exposure and public attitude, and ANOVA to compare perception across different media-source groups. Data was collected online through Google Forms, ensuring easy access for respondents across Karnataka. The responses were coded, cleaned, and analysed using statistical tools such as SPSS, Excel to draw meaningful conclusions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite widespread media coverage, very little is known about how television, online news, and social media shape public perception of the Mekedatu project. Different media platforms present contrasting narratives, which may influence awareness and opinions in different ways. This creates a clear need to study the actual impact of media exposure on public perception using primary data.

SAMPLING PLAN

The study adopted a non-probability convenience sampling method, as respondents were selected based on easy accessibility and willingness to participate. A total of 50 respondents from Karnataka completed the questionnaire. The sample included individuals who regularly consume news through at least one media source such as TV, social media, or online portals. The sample size is suitable for conducting correlation and ANOVA tests for exploratory research. The focus was on young and active media users, as they are more likely to engage with Mekedatu-related content.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The sample size is limited to 50 respondents, which may not represent the entire population of Karnataka.
2. Convenience sampling was used, which limits the generalizability of the findings.
3. The study captures perception at only one point in time and does not track changes over time.
4. The study focuses only on media influence and does not evaluate the technical or political aspects of the Mekedatu project.
5. Rural respondents with limited digital or media access may be underrepresented.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

RELIABILITY TEST

Table no. 01

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Media Exposure (Q1–Q5)	0.956	3
Media Attitude (Q5–Q10)	0.971	2

Interpretation

The reliability test shows that both scales used in this study are highly consistent. The Media Exposure scale ($\alpha = 0.956$) and the Media Attitude scale ($\alpha = 0.971$) both exceed the accepted standard for excellent internal reliability. This means the questions within each group measure the same idea effectively. Because of this strong consistency, the results derived from these scales can be trusted for further statistical analysis.

Objective 1: To examine the relationship between media exposure frequency and public attitude toward the Mekedatu Project.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table no. 02

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Media Exposure	50	3.31	1.27	1	5
Public Attitude	50	3.36	0.96	1	5

Interpretation

The descriptive results show that respondents generally reported moderate levels of media exposure and attitude toward the Mekedatu Project. The averages for both variables fall around the mid-point of the scale, indicating neither very low nor very high engagement. The wide spread in media exposure scores suggests that people differ greatly in how often they consume Mekedatu-related content. Overall, the data reflects a mixed but balanced level of awareness among participants.

CORRELATION RESULTS

Table no. 03

Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson r	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Media Exposure	Media Attitude	0.9105	0.000	50

Interpretation

The correlation result shows a very strong positive link between media exposure and public attitude ($r = 0.9105$). This means that the more people consume Mekedatu-related content, the stronger their opinions become about the project. The extremely low p-value ($p < 0.001$) confirms that this connection is statistically reliable. In simple terms, media exposure clearly plays a major role in shaping how people think about the issue.

Heatmap showing Correlation Results

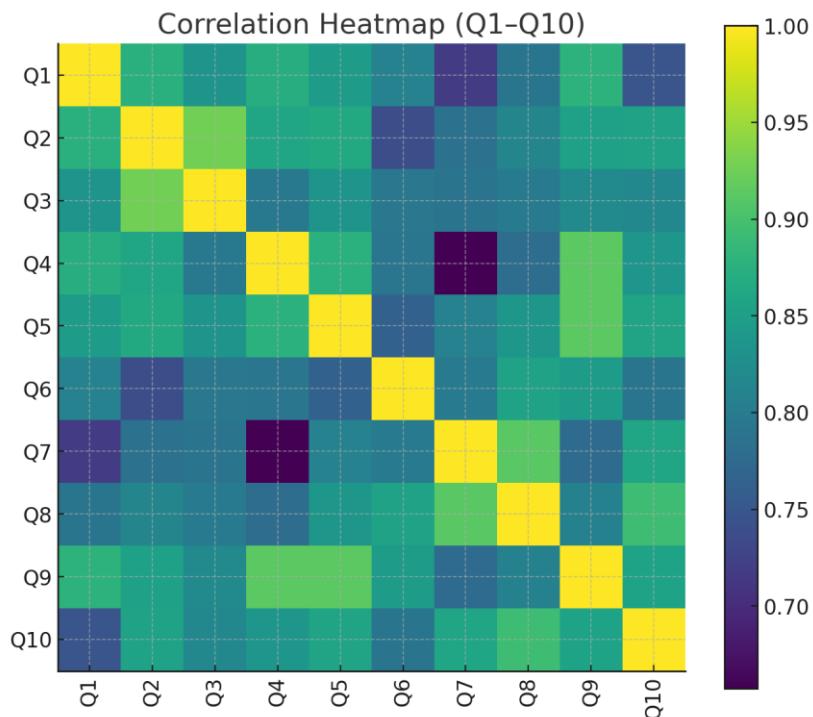


Fig no. 01

Interpretation:

The heatmap shows that most of the items from Q1 to Q10 are strongly correlated with one another, indicating that respondents answered these questions in a consistent manner. The darker and brighter blocks along the diagonal reflect high internal agreement within each item set. Some variation appears between the early questions and the later ones, suggesting slight differences between television exposure and social media usage patterns. Overall, the heatmap confirms that both groups of questions are closely connected and suitable for further analysis like correlation and ANOVA.

Hypothesis Testing:

The correlation test produced a very strong positive relationship with a highly significant p-value ($p < 0.001$). This clearly indicates that as media exposure increases, public attitude toward the Mekedatu Project becomes stronger. Because the results are statistically meaningful and not due to chance, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H_{11}) is accepted, confirming a significant positive relationship between the two variables.

Objective 2: To determine whether public attitude toward the Mekedatu Project differs across categories of media users (TV, newspapers, online news, social media).

ANOVA RESULTS

Table no. 04

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	32.944	3	10.981	13.350	0.000002
Within Groups	38.668	47	0.822	-	-
Total	71.612	50	-	-	-

Interpretation

The ANOVA results indicate that people's attitudes vary significantly depending on which media source they primarily depend on. Digital media users, especially those using social media and online news show noticeably stronger attitudes than traditional media users. The statistically significant F-value confirms that these differences are meaningful and not due to random variation. This suggests that the media platform itself influences how strongly people engage with the Mekedatu issue.

POST-HOC TEST

Table no. 05

Group 1	Group 2	n1	n2	t	p-value
Social media	Television	12	12	3.27	0.004
Social media	Newspapers	12	8	3.20	0.0049
Online News	Television	19	12	4.65	0.00032
Online News	Newspapers	19	8	5.52	0.000062
Social media	Online News	12	19	1.52	0.144
Television	Newspapers	12	8	0.97	0.339

Interpretation

The post-hoc test shows that users of online news and social media hold much stronger attitudes compared to those who rely on TV or newspapers. The differences between digital and traditional groups are statistically significant, highlighting the stronger influence of digital platforms. However, users within each category (social vs online, TV vs newspaper) do not differ much from each other. This pattern clearly indicates that digital media drives higher engagement and stronger opinions.

Hypothesis Testing:

The ANOVA test showed a significant difference in public attitude among media groups, with an F-value of 13.35 and $p < 0.001$. This means that respondents who rely on different media sources do not express the same level of attitude toward the Mekedatu Project. Since the p-value is well below the threshold for significance, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted, confirming that public attitude varies meaningfully between traditional and digital media users.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. The study found a very strong positive relationship between media exposure and public attitude toward the Mekedatu project. Respondents who consumed more news, especially through digital platforms showed stronger opinions and higher awareness levels.
2. ANOVA results showed significant differences in perception based on the primary media source. Social media and online news users displayed the strongest attitudes, whereas newspaper readers showed the lowest engagement.
3. Television viewers demonstrated moderate awareness, indicating that traditional media still plays a role but is less influential compared to digital platforms.
4. The heatmap and reliability tests confirmed that all items were consistent and measured the constructs effectively, adding credibility to the results.
5. The overall findings indicate that media framing and frequency of exposure have a clear influence on how people interpret the Mekedatu project and the larger Cauvery dispute.

SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Government agencies should provide clear and regular updates about the Mekedatu project through both traditional and digital media to reduce misinformation and confusion.
2. Media platforms should prioritize balanced reporting by presenting scientific, environmental, and legal aspects along with political statements to help the public form informed opinions.
3. Awareness programs, especially targeted towards youth, can be organized through social media campaigns since digital platforms show the highest influence.
4. Journalists and content creators should avoid sensational framing, as emotionally charged reporting can exaggerate fear or conflict in interstate water issues.
5. Future communication efforts should use infographics, short videos, and simplified explanations to help the general public understand the real implications of the project.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how media exposure influences public perception of the Mekedatu project, and the results clearly show that media plays a powerful role in shaping people's views. Individuals who consume news more frequently; especially through social media and online portals tend to hold stronger and more defined attitudes toward the project. The differences across media groups highlight how each platform shapes information differently, leading to varying levels of awareness and engagement. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of responsible communication and the need for accurate, balanced reporting. As the Mekedatu project continues to remain in public discussion, understanding media influence becomes essential for policymakers, media professionals, and citizens alike.

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