

Media and Conflict in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Fourteen months into a ceasefire agreement, decades of ossified media culture show signs of a gradual change. Much attention has recently focused on the media and its part in the ethno-political conflict of Sri Lanka. However, articles in the press examining the complex interactions between the media and the conflict have been reactionary, cautioning the public against tenets of 'peace journalism', or have too easily come to the conclusion that media in Sri Lanka is unproblematic and objective in its reporting. On the other hand, debate on the underpinnings of media freedom in Sri Lanka, coupled with an examination of its biases, ethno-centricity and market driven agendas has been sparse. *Ergo*, the role of the media as an essential and pivotal institution of democratic governance, and an examination on how it can best aid conflict transformation and help support and critically analyse the emergence of a post-conflict situation is of pivotal importance to the evolving context in Sri Lanka.

Overview of media in Sri Lanka

The media in Sri Lanka can be broadly placed into two categories – those which are owned and controlled by the State and those which are privately owned and controlled. The State owns the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. (Lake House) which has the broadest outreach in terms of distribution networks, and which also benefits from extensive State advertising. Radio and television were a government monopoly until the mid-1980s. Since then, several privately-owned television/radio stations have been established. The state continues to control the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (radio), the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (television) and ITN radio and television network. The transmission capacities of the private stations are much more limited than that of the state-owned radio and television. Thus, State radio and television remain the electronic media that reach the largest number of consumers, especially in the far-flung areas of the island. In the north and east, in areas under the control of the LTTE, the Voice of Tigers, the radio broadcast of the LTTE, can be heard within a limited radius.

There are 7 large private establishments that print a number of daily newspapers in national languages, as well as some more private establishments that publish several weekend

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newspapers. There are 3 large privately-owned establishments broadcasting on radio and television - and several other private radio stations.

There are several journalists' organizations that work for the promotion of their profession. Among them are the Free Media Movement, Working Journalists' Association and the Photo-Journalists Association. There is also the Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka, and a Foreign Correspondents' Association. There are number of trade unions of media workers and the Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU), which unites all of them. The Free Media Movement (FMM) which is a grouping of independent journalists and persons working in different fields in the media is the most active organization in Sri Lanka that advocates and lobbies for the freedom of expression and information.

Problems of media in Sri Lanka

Compounded by protracted ethno-political conflict, exacerbated by ineffective media reforms and coupled with the imperatives of market economics, the mainstream media in Sri Lanka continues to be burdened with a number of problems. Many newspapers, for instance, perceive ethnicity as immutable and innate, and, on account of a conscious decision or distinct lack of willingness, do not demystify stereotypes and buttress institutions and practices that can ameliorate ethno-political conflict. In short, the media in Sri Lanka exacerbates existing communal and ethnic tensions by continuously playing on the nationalist and religious emotions of the people.

While it is natural that any media has to keep its language readership in mind, it is also the case that impartiality and accuracy suffer as a result of this inherent requirement. In an ethnically polarised society, ethnic bias in mainstream news media takes many forms and is also reflected in the ownership of media houses. On the one hand, the ethnic ownership of media annuls efforts by reporters to examine the realities of other ethnic groups. On the other hand, sustained exposure to the world view of ethno-centric editorial policies and ethnic ownership enervates new and vibrant journalism that seeks to question and critique the dominant paradigm. This complex dialectic is evident in almost all the mainstream media in Sri Lanka, and is a vicious cycle that must be broken for any real media reform.

Newspaper establishments owned by Sinhalese show a majoritarian bias regardless of their language medium. Three such establishments publish newspapers in English, and all of them have a pro-Sinhala bias in varying degrees. Although English literacy is around 7% in Sri Lanka, and a sizeable amount of Tamils are included in this percentage, no effort is made to examine the news from the perspective of the Tamils or any other minority community. Furthermore, none of these Sinhala owned private mainstream media establishments publish newspapers in Tamil. That said, there are newspapers like the *Daily Mirror* and *Lankadeepa*, which feature regular columnists who write about inter-ethnic perspectives.

The same, unfortunately, is true for media establishments with Tamil ownership. None of them publish any newspapers in Sinhala, although one of them used to publish a weekend newspaper in English with a definite pro-Tamil bias. It can be argued that Tamil viewpoints in the media are defined by a reactive articulation against Sinhala hegemony. In recent times, the Tamil speaking Muslim community has complained that the mainstream Tamil media ignores their concerns, and as a result it is not impossible to imagine the emergence of a Tamil language newspaper with

Muslim ownership. There are already reports of the emergence of Muslim newspapers, albeit with extremely limited circulation in the East, which appeal to the radical sections of the Muslim community.

The State owned Lake House publishes newspapers in all three languages. State owned mainstream media in Sri Lanka supinely accept the dominant political paradigm – when the state is at war, conflict sensitive journalism and independence usually succumb to the enfilade of propaganda. When the state is at peace, the State media blindly and uncritically endorse the peace initiatives of the incumbent government. Also not to be forgotten is ‘Dedunna’, the Sinhala newspaper published by the LTTE. It has become the Tamil voice in Sinhala, reporting on Tamil grievances during the on-going peace process.

Along with a state-centric bias, the mainstream media in Sri Lanka largely ignored issues related to development and gender equality. Human Rights is newsworthy because it is a tool of partisan mud-slinging, no real examination of the need for human rights in a peace process, or examination on the qualitative aspects of human rights in a peace process are to be found in the mainstream press. This is brought out in a study of issues report in the mainstream media²:

Type of Report	Sinhala Newspapers	Tamil Newspapers	English Newspapers
Actual Combat	78	52	36
Arrests (War related)	33	09	05
Civilian Issues	18	18	11
Refugee Issues	12	10	15
Peace Talks	14	07	00
Human Rights	03	16	04
Development Related	04	18	02
Other	86	17	02

As one can see from above, coverage of the war to the exclusion of related civilian issues was the norm in the English and Sinhala media. Issues of this nature are the domain of the ‘alternative’ media in Sri Lanka. In terms of a language difference however, as can be seen clearly above, that the overwhelming majority of development related and news related to human rights is covered in the Tamil media exposes the deep schism between the foci of Sinhala and Tamil mainstream media.

Furthermore, after the General Elections in 2001, it can argued that the same political party which curries favour with the private media is, by virtue of being in power, in control of State media as well. Thus, the opposition constantly alleges that they do not receive equal coverage.

What may not be immediately evident from the above is the peculiar relationship between the market and Sinhala-Buddhist ideology in Sri Lanka, with regard to media institutions. For instance, the pro-Sinhala Buddhist ideology of the Upali Group of Newspapers is not solely based

²Media Monitor, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Vol. 1, Issue 1, June 1997.

on market share. Although the market share of the Upali Group of Newspapers is much smaller than the Wijeya Group, which is the market leader, the former makes little effort to break out of a framework defined by its acceptance of the Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony.

As *Media Monitor*³ points out, when reporting on conflict, there are even occasions when the same writer provides divergent accounts of the same incident on the same day to the English and Sinhala publications of the same organisation!

Electronic media in Sri Lanka closely mirrors the problems of print media. As a concise example, the Centre for Policy Alternatives and INFORM, a local NGO, monitored the electronic media coverage of the General Election in 2000 with the assistance of ARTICLE 19, an international organization working to combat censorship by promoting freedom of expression and access to official information. This was the first ever such monitoring exercise covering all the electronic media (radio and television, private and state) during a general election in Sri Lanka.⁴

It was reported on 10th September 2000 in the private print media that the Criminal Investigations Department of the Police (CID) had detected a large number of security stickers at a private press outlet. The stickers, which had been ordered by the Commissioner of Elections, Mr. Dayananda Dissanayake, were intended for poll cards as an anti-rigging measure for the forthcoming General Elections. The electronic media gave wide publicity to the issue from the afternoon of 18th September 2000. CPA and INFORM monitored both the private and public broadcast media coverage of the issue until 20th September 2000.

The following table shows the electronic media coverage of this issue:

Category	Total Time (Mins)	For E.C %*	Against E.C %*
All Government Channels	170.6	23.64%	70.49%
All Private Channels	68.46	64.4%	17.25%

*Neutral news reports are not included in the percentages. Rupavahini, ITN, MTV and TNL channels were monitored as part of this exercise.

Two facts stood out in the coverage of this incident by electronic media owned by the State:

1. The views of the governing People Alliance (PA) politicians dominated the programmes and there was no significant time allocated to coverage of the views of the Opposition. In particular, the participants in discussions and special programmes were limited to PA politicians and campaigners for the PA.
2. The Election Commissioner's views were given limited coverage in terms of time allocation and prominence.

The private media was no better. As the report states:

There was a clear difference in the way in which the Election Commissioner's issue was reported in the channels owned by the two groups monitored (MTV and TNL). While the MTV channels attempted to be "balanced" by presenting both government and

³ Media Monitor, *ibid*.

opposition party perspectives, TNL (Sinhala and English news) had little representation of government views. Although Sirasa (MTV) Sinhala news did spend 60.6% of the time spent on reporting the issue in favor of the Commissioner, it also spent 33.75% of the time in items reflecting negatively on the Commissioner. On the other hand, TNL Sinhala news spent 73% of the time spent on the issue in favour of the Commissioner, and the government perspective was not represented at all. In addition, where the TNL news defended the Election Commissioner's actions, it did so mostly by attacking the ruling party rather than by promoting the ideals of democracy and the independence of the Election Commissioner.

Partisan reporting and the lack of journalism that is accurate and fair, and one which places the issue in context is, as evident from above, a problem common to both electronic and print media. **The link also has to be made between partisan reporting and conflict.** Partisan reporting in Sri Lanka is inextricably linked to political violence, which in turns often exacerbates ethnic conflict since issues like ethnicity, nationalism and communalism are often used for political mileage. Hence, what may not be immediately evident from the above is that partisan reporting is often symptomatic of other inherent biases and a lack of professionalism, which often serves to heighten ethnic tension and conflict.

As the *Media Monitor*⁵ again points out:

1. Sri Lankan Newspapers of the 3 language media cater to sets of individuals who inhabit different worlds and espouse different worldviews. Though the island is small, yet the gulf that separates these language groups appears to be ever-widening, particularly between the Tamil readership and the rest.
2. An analysis of the reportage of the North-East war demonstrates that these differences are not accidental or innocent, but rather, a reflection of deep ideological divergences that need to be brought to the surface and addressed directly for any lasting solution to the ethnic crisis to be meaningful and just.

News Coverage in Sri Lanka: A Case Study

On 9th October 2002, a clash took place between a few hundred people and the Special Task Force (STF) Army Camp in the East of Sri Lanka, in a place called Kanjirankuda. Some persons among the group attacked the camp with stones and tried to enter and destroy the camp premises. They wanted the camp to be removed. On this particular day, according to LTTE sources, two of their members had been assaulted by STF personnel, a charge which the STF denied. The LTTE undoubtedly helped mobilise the mob against the STF camp. Unable to stop the agitated mob from entering the camp after using tear gas and rubber bullets, STF personnel opened fire using live ammunition, killing seven people and injuring 14 others.

A look at the way in which the mainstream media in Colombo reported this incident a day after is revealing.

⁴ For full report please visit www.cpalanka.org/media or email author

⁵ Media Monitor, Vol. 1, Issue 1, June 1997

English News Papers⁶

- Four killed as mob attacked STF camp – Premier orders full probe (Daily Mirror, Wijeya Group)
- LTTE storms Akkareipattu STF Camp (The Island, Upali Group)

Sinhala Newspapers

- Gun fire at a group who tried to storm in to a STF camp – 6 dead. 5 STF injured as well (Daily Lankadeepa, Front Page 3 column, Wijeya Group)
- Four tigers dead after clash in Ampara – PM orders commander to investigate (Divaina, Front Page 3 column, Upali Group)
- Group which attacked STF Camp shot at. Six dead. 27 injured. PM Orders a probe (Lakbima, Front Page 2 column, Sumathi Group)
- Military leaders dispatched to investigate Akkareipattu incident where two persons have died. (Dinamina, Front Page 3 column, Lake House)

Tamil Newspapers⁷

- Four dead as STF fires into a hartal. 14 injured. Potuvil LTTE leader accuses STF (Virakeseri)
- Seven people dead, 15 injured due to STF firing in Thitukkovil – Ranil orders probe (Thinakkural)
- Seven dead, 16 injured due to STF firing into a peoples rally in East (Suder Oli)
- Hartal in Kalmunei, tires in Akkareipattu burned to protest STF action – PM orders immediate inquiry (Thinakaran, State Owned)⁸

Other than the immediately evident differences in the headlines, one can also see that not even a single Tamil language newspaper used the word ‘stormed’ or equivalent. The Tamil media has the STF firing into a hartal or peoples protest, and gave more prominence to the LTTE version of events. On the other hand, news reports of privately owned English newspapers had the STF firing into a mob led by the LTTE. Here too, while the Island directly attributes the mob attack to the LTTE, the Daily Mirror does not.

The Sinhala newspapers were milder in their headlines, but reflected the bias in the English newspapers. The Sinhala daily (Divaina) of the Upali Group did not mirror the headlines of its English counterpart (The Island). However, the weekend Divaina, under a different Editor, took a Sinhala nationalist line on the Akkareipattu incident. This anomaly between the daily Divaina and weekend Divaina is also reflected in differences of reporting and bias between the Daily Mirror and the Sunday Times of the Wijeya Group.

On the whole, while State owned newsprint tried to water down the incident and tried to show that the situation was under control, the private owned media took to the other end of the spectrum and reported the incident in with inflammatory headlines and reporting.

⁶ The Kanchamkuda incident is not reported as headlines news in the Ceylon Daily News (State owned)

⁷ There are three Tamil dailies in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. One of them is the provincial edition of the Thinakkural, which has its head office in Colombo. Another is Uthayan, which is the sister paper of Suder Oli, published in Colombo. The third is Valampuri, a small newspaper based in Jaffna. There are no other provincial newspapers in Sri Lanka.

⁸ There is one other Tamil daily, Thinakkathir, operating from Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, which by this time had ceased to exist due to political violence against it by the LTTE, though it was not in fact a newspaper that was anti-LTTE.

Four weeklies supporting the JVP and the SLFP axis all portrayed a doomsday scenario during this incident and did not report the Tamil perspective at all.

Media and Conflict Resolution⁹

Where undemocratic politicians inspire, provoke and underwrite national fears and prejudices, and where journalists do not benefit from a tradition of independence, but satisfy demands of leaders for support for the 'national interest', media soon becomes a vehicle for propaganda. This is often the case in Sri Lanka, where the constant quest of media is an elusive search for 'objectivity'. In this quest, propaganda becomes truth, and the search itself becomes rooted in vested interests that often veil and distort reality.

Furthermore, in instances of ethno-political conflict, the role of the media is inextricably entwined with the particular dynamics of that conflict. The media can be a frightful weapon of violence when it propagates messages of intolerance or disinformation that manipulate public sentiment. Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda is one of the most appalling contemporary examples. Using a blend of popular entertainment and proselytizing by announcers, the government-supported broadcasts demonized one group of people and built resentment and fear among the other group. One can also see this in the journalism in Sri Lanka, where there is a profusion of ethnic stereotyping. Take the following for example:

- *Attempt to steal chain of soldier: Muslim suspect in custody* – Divaina, 9th September 2001
- *230 LTTE cadres begin hunger strike in Kalutara Prison* – Lankadeepa, 2nd February 2002 (the article goes on to mention that these 230 'cadre' are actually only suspected of belonging to the LTTE)
- *Muslim erects barbed-wire fence around plot of land given by English Governor* – Lankadeepa, 1st September 2001
- *Tamil woman in custody for pick-pocketing Rs. 40,000* – Lankadeepa, 25th May, 2001

But there is another aspect to the media. It can be an instrument of conflict resolution, when the information it presents is reliable, respects human rights, and represents diverse views. It's the kind of media that upholds accountability and exposes malfeasance, one that enables a society to make well-informed choices, which is the precursor of democratic governance. It is a media that reduces conflict and fosters human security.

Such a media culture can be a vital tool in transcending conflict, working towards a just and lasting peace by going beyond the problems of the present.

In general, the media can have four inputs on any peace process. First, they help in **defining the political atmosphere** in which the peace process takes place. Second, the media has an **active influence on the strategy and behaviour of the stakeholders** to the conflict. Third, the media

⁹ Also see *The Varying Role of the News Media in Peace Processes: Theory and Research* by Gadi Wolfsfeld from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Paper given at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association at San Francisco, California (August, 2001).

has an important influence on the **nature of debate** about a peace process. Fourth, the media can **buttress or weaken public legitimacy of the stakeholders** involved in the peace process.

An understanding of how each of these facets interweave to shape the peace process is of pivotal importance for all news media personnel and institutions in Sri Lanka.

A peace process is usually long and complex, and the direction it takes is often open to interpretation. Journalistic norms and routines, which dictate the selection of sources and construction of story lines, can have a significant effect on which interpretation appears to make the most sense. News reports provide citizens with important clues about the political climate surrounding the peace process. Is the process moving forward or back? Does the overall level of violence appear to be rising or declining? Is the LTTE keeping its side of the agreements? Are events in the East undermining the peace process? How much of the public supports the government initiatives for peace? Will there be snap elections? How will the constant bickering between the President and the PM affect the peace process? What will the effect be of the LTTE pulling out of negotiations? The answers to such questions – which are often provided by ongoing news coverage – help determine whether the political atmosphere is conducive to making peace.¹⁰

We must also understand that **peace and news make strange bedfellows**. News covers events, not processes. This presents the public with an extremely narrow and simplistic view of what is happening and makes it difficult for the stakeholders to the conflict promote long-term policies. The Sri Lankan peace process, like any other, will be marked by protracted negotiations with occasional breakthroughs. Adopting a short-term perspective often leads to a sense of impatience and frustration, and the media's emphasis on the immediate makes it difficult for the government, the LTTE and other stakeholders maintain support amongst their constituencies for the peace process over a long period of time. The sum of all this is deeply ironic. While negotiations are intrinsically considered major news, the protracted nature of negotiations will entice media to flag and highlight the negative rather than the positive of these negotiations.

The **search for drama within a peace process** can also be detrimental to the process. Headlines, as one has often seen over the past few weeks, which focus on threats, accusations and sensational confrontations, generate anger on both sides, with the inevitable demand for retaliation. Disagreements turn into crises, enemies become more frightening and opponents more viscous. This dynamic also raises the level of rancour in the internal debate over the peace process. Reportage on the flashpoints and incidents in the East rarely give voice to the moderate forces in each community. By highlighting the most angry and violent forces, the media make it almost impossible for leaders, moderates and civil society carry out a reasoned debate over the issue. Over a period of time, this search for sensationalism over moderation, action over reason, and radical voices instead of temperate ones, leads to an exacerbation of the conflict and even the radicalisation of moderate voices.

¹⁰ Thiru Kadijah says that “even if we are ready to resist the easy explanation of cynicism of the part of those who...profess commitment to peace and concede sincerity to them, (we are forced) to recognise also a tremendous blindness on the part of the professors to what they are actually doing. It is a blindness that is based on a large capacity for self-deception which is exactly what any movement out of the impasse of the ethnic conflict can do without”. An excerpt from pg. 15 in *The Media and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Thiru Kadijah, Marga Monograph Series on Ethnic Reconciliation, No. 19, 2001, Marga Institute

One must not forget the extent to which the media in Sri Lanka is the repository of public prejudice, majoritarian interests and market capitalism. It is especially important to remember that the greater the frequency and severity of crises which affect the peace process, the more likely it is that the media will play a negative role. That both of these are usually facets of mainstream media in any region with protracted ethno-political conflict.

Events that will shape and inform the dialogue and debate on the peace process in Sri Lanka will increasingly stem from areas and peoples whose concerns and fears will have hitherto been ignored in the mainstream media. The emergence of a radical Muslim and Tamil press is to be taken as a result of this neglect. The inherent ethnocentrism of this radical media cannot be expected to provide reasoned analysis, insightful and constructive criticism, or help diffuse ethno-political tension.

It is here that consensus amongst political leaders can help the media. When there is a lack of political consensus, as one finds in Sri Lanka, intra and inter-party power politics will inform and shape reportage on the peace process. Within such a context, it is unfeasible to think that the media will try to report the conflict with any degree of accuracy since media personnel and institutions close to centres of political power will rarely transcend partisan agendas. This is not to say that the media is merely an external tool, which is supine to the whims of all parties to the conflict to propagate partisan agendas. As Thiru Kandiah has noted “the media are central instrumentalities of the conflict, not just passive tools or containers or vehicles of the operative substantive factors and positions, the shape of which has already been determined elsewhere.”¹¹

Journalists must recognise that virtually every technical and editorial decision made by them in presenting conflict has potential consequences for the conflict itself. All these forms of reporting generally adhere to the first principle of mediation, which is to give all stakeholders an opportunity to present their views. In the process of giving each side a hearing, several important steps toward conflict resolution can occur: the parties may be educated about each other's point of view; stereotypes are challenged; and initial perceptions can be re-evaluated and clarified.

Of equal importance to the emerging context in Sri Lanka is the ability of reporters to ask questions that lead the conflicting parties to identify and discuss the deeper interests and needs that underlie their public positions. Reporters and commentators must put the conflict in historical and social perspective, deepening everyone's understanding of it. Good reporting and news analysis should look beyond stated positions toward the interests and needs of the parties. This exploration of the interests of stakeholders by the media helps disputants and the public identify the shared problems that are causing the conflict.

¹¹ *The Media and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Thiru Kandiah, Marga Monograph Series on Ethnic Reconciliation, No. 19, 2001, Marga Institute

Presidential Election 1999: Monitoring the Mainstream Media¹²

On 20th October 1999, over a year before she completed her first term as Executive President, H.E. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga announced her decision to hold a Presidential Election to obtain a mandate for a second term. The date of election was announced by the Commissioner of Elections to be the 21st of December, 1999.

Conclusions of Media Monitoring

Government newspapers were blatantly partial towards the ruling PA candidate, with the reportage and analysis maintaining a media style that was crude and lacking in finesse. When one looks at election reportage, one could discern the fact that they attempted to appeal to people's emotions rather than base their articles on a critical and logical foundation. Elections in this country, Presidential, Parliamentary or Provincial, are basically very charged and often violent. The newspapers fed on and thrived on this atmosphere.

It is possible to say that most newspapers assisted the politicians in their attempt to use the North-East conflict as a political tool... Most papers were seen to cater to politicians, rather than the people, intentionally or unintentionally. Another interpretation is that the media merely operated within the framework of the existing media culture.

Conflict Sensitive Journalism in Sri Lanka

Within the context of the present ceasefire in Sri Lanka, it is certainly the role of journalists to act as watchdogs to violations of the ceasefire agreement and other developments in the North-East, and report it to the public once their factual accuracy has been suitably determined. Conflict sensitive journalism should not be misconstrued as an attempt to mystify the truth, or to hide it. Conflict sensitive journalism at the end of the day, is nothing more than the practice of good journalism – journalism that critically examines and also looks beyond the problems of any given context. In Sri Lanka, conflict sensitive journalism would examine the shortcomings of the ceasefire agreement, explore how society and polity could address these lacunae, critically analyse the dissipation or build-up of tensions in the North-East between ethnic groups, the Army and the LTTE and other armed factions, and explore options to bring an end to armed hostilities. A conflict sensitive journalist would ensure that every story of a ceasefire violation would examine not only the violation itself, but also its underlying causes, and explore how violations of a similar nature can be avoided in future. Conflict sensitive journalism extrapolates from incidents in the present, lessons for the future. It engages with actors and stakeholders, examines their concerns, and formulates strategies to buttress developments on the ground for an end to armed conflict.

Peace Journalism seems to attract derision from many quarters, but is also somewhat of a misnomer. It seems to suggest that there is a separate category of journalism that one can adhere to if one is to be sensitive to conflict. This is untrue.

In June 2002, the Centre for Policy Alternatives and International Media Support (Denmark), conducted several workshops and seminars on conflict sensitive journalism for print, television

and radio media in Sri Lanka. In covering these workshops, some columnists maintained that 'peace journalism' was a false construct, and that no serious journalist would be against peace.

However, peace journalism is nothing more than the practice of a journalism that adheres rigidly to a set of ethics and principles that are predicated on professionalism and a commitment to the truth. Truth however has many facets, and any one of them alone is a lie. This is an adage that journalists must always remember. Good journalists must not suspend judgement on everything in their quest for objectivity. Certain facts must be stated, and obvious conclusions must be drawn. However, journalists must strive to present facts mindful of a larger context, where single incidents are part of a larger whole, where individuals and groups are part of a complex matrix that is in constant flux.

Capacity Building for Media

Ideally, the news media should serve as a forum in which proponents and opponents are encouraged to express their views in an open and reasoned fashion. While such an ideal is rarely achieved, it is important nevertheless to identify those structures and processes that prevent constructive criticism and healthy debate on the peace process.

By examining the ideologies of key protagonists and spoilers, the media can often flag aspects of the peace process that are important and cannot be ignored. Assigning a reporter for instance, to spend some time with the LTTE or amongst the Muslims and Sinhalese in the East could make them develop new sources close to the ground, identify moderate voices, examine the internal dynamics of emergent socio-political realities, provide perspectives which are not ethnocentric in form or content and examine political arguments that go beyond specific incidents into the deeper roots of the conflict.

Greater research must also be done on whether there is a potential conflict between the Freedom of Expression, Speech and Information and the protection and advancement of the peace process. How critical should one be of the process? Can one be first with the news and also be impartial, accurate and reliable? How can the media maintain the balance between transparency of the peace process and the need for confidentiality? Can the media meet the imperatives of market forces, sensationalism and commercialisation, and at the same time create a forum for serious and responsible public debate?

There are no concrete answers to these questions, and the media in Sri Lanka, as media anywhere else, will always be characterised by a combination of all these factors. In all this, what must not be forgotten is that the media is a very important actor in the peace process. The media is a pivotal catalyst in the success of the peace process, within an enabling political atmosphere. Animating its involvement should be a realisation that citizens depend on the media for information on the peace process. The relationship between the stakeholders to the conflict, the political framework of the peace process, media reporting and the public is a symbiotic one – each moulding the other, in a continuum that contains within it the key to conflict transformation as well as the seeds of conflict formation.¹³

¹² Excerpt from *Media Monitor*, Vo. 2 Issue 1, Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2000

¹³ Also see *The Role of Regional and International Media in Peace Building*, report on workshop held by the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), 27th June – 1st July 2000, Entebbe, Uganda.

The future of the media in Sri Lanka

The problem facing journalists in Sri Lanka is how to protect their 'independence' when the world around them asks them to follow strategies and ethics which bind them to a certain ideology and path. No path or method is value neutral. And yet, the imperatives of journalism – accuracy, fairness, impartiality and reliability¹⁴ – bolstered by the freedom of expression, speech and information and open government provide the backbone of democratic pluralism. However, the multiplicity of voices in the media should not become a cacophony of half-truths, and must avoid the ills of rabid ethnocentrism and tabloid sensationalism.

To do this, there could be several practical steps media organisations can take:

- Promote ethnic and gender balance in the newsroom.
- Regular updating and internal review of editing and style handbooks.
- In-house workshops and training on conflict sensitive journalism. All journalists should undergo specialised training in conflict transformation and peace building.
- Advocate the inclusion of a curriculum of peace-building and conflict transformation processes for journalists in universities and schools of journalism.
- Greater co-operation between personnel in Colombo and grass-roots level correspondents. Building the capacity of provincial and grass-roots level correspondents, and increasing the interaction with journalists from Colombo is mutually beneficial. It helps journalists from Colombo better understand local conditions and develop more informed, diverse and reliable sources of information, and gives grass-roots level journalists the experience and know-how with which to effectively report conflict.
- Recognition by media organisations of the need for voluntary self-regulation and maintenance of professional standards, codes of ethics and conduct.¹⁵

Furthermore, the importance of legislation that facilitates the free flow of information cannot be understated. Media reform has also to be looked at holistically. Inextricably entwined with the impetus for media reform should also be the enabling framework of legislation regarding the right to information, the right to speech and the freedom of expression. A piecemeal approach to media reform, neglecting the wider canvas within which such reform takes place, is short-sighted and will not lead to any real change.

There are of course no easy answers to address the problems facing the press in Sri Lanka. The media in Sri Lanka, as media anywhere else, will always be characterised by a combination of all the factors outlined in this article. It is up to progressive and proactive individuals, journalists and civil society interventions to help the media develop a more positive, trans-ethnic and unifying role than it has in the past.

¹⁴ See also Howard, *ibid*.

¹⁵ See also *Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting*, International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002

Excerpt from *Freedom of Press 2003: A Global Survey of Media Independence*¹⁶

On Sri Lanka: “Although the constitution provides for freedom of expression, the government has restricted this right in practice, particularly with regard to coverage of the civil war. However, authorities lifted censorship of military-related news last year. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebel group tightly restricts the media in areas under its control. In a major advance for press freedom, an act of parliament removed criminal defamation legislation from the statute books in June. The government controls many of the largest media outlets, and political coverage in the state-owned media favours the ruling party. While private newspapers and broadcasters scrutinize government policies, journalists do practice some self-censorship. Reporters, particularly those who cover human rights issues, corruption, or police misconduct, continued to face some harassment, threats, and violent attacks at the hands of the police, security forces, government supporters, and the LTTE during the year.”

The larger goal of peace talks and conflict transformation is to enhance the capacity of a society to manage its own conflicts without resorting to armed violence. Peace talks and conflict transformation processes however, do not take place in a normative void and usually take place in a highly charged and unstable media environment, one in which information is scarce and often suspect. Journalists in Sri Lanka have to realise the pivotal importance of the media in the process of conflict transformation - media that continues to spew out half-truths, propaganda and poor information, will negatively counter all other attempts at peace building.

Sri Lanka is at present undergoing significant changes in polity and society. To examine the dynamics of this change requires a sensitivity to the historical moment, a commitment to reporting the truth, and an imagination that refuses to be bogged down in the problems of the present. The smorgasbord of issues that come in the wake of the CFA, are part of peace talks in the near future, and indeed, are part of the greater process of conflict transformation requires journalists who don't just report facts, who don't just inform the public, but go beyond facts and incidents to critically and creatively explore avenues for conflict transformation. Conflict sells - but so should peace, and it is up to journalists to ensure this.

- ENDS -

¹⁶ Published by Freedom House, 2003. Available online at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/media/pressrel/043003.htm>