

## National Mainstream Media and Regional Medias 'Contesting Hegemonies' – Trilateral (linguistic) media in Sri Lanka

Paper presented by Mr. Sunanda Deshapriya at SAFHR Regional Workshop on 'Sensitizing Media Covering Internal and Inter-State Conflicts', from 29<sup>th</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December 2002, Chennai, India.

It is not new to say that there is an ethnic bias in the mainstream media in Sri Lanka. Innumerable studies have proved this fact beyond an iota of doubt. 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 perceive ethnicity as immutable and innate, neglecting its responsibility to demystify stereotypes and buttress institutions and practices that can ameliorate ethno-political conflict.

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 bias. In an ethnically polarised society, ethnic bias in mainstream news media takes many forms. The ethnic bias of a particular newspaper 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 weltanschauung and ideology 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 literary 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.

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. 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. One can already see the emergence of alternative Muslim newspapers which appeal to the radical sections of the Muslim community.

The State owned Lake House published newspapers in all three languages, with the English and Tamil newspapers also showing a distinct pro-Sinhala bias. The State 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.

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. 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 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.

This can result in tragicomic scenarios. For instance, in the general election of December 2001, the Upali Group of Newspaper took a pro-UNF (United National Front) line and wrote against the anti-LTTE stance of the PA (Peoples Alliance). However, during the course of the present peace process, the newspapers of the Upali Group have been virulent critics of almost all aspects of the process, and have done little to demystify and constructively engage with the entire process.

## CASE STUDY

On 9<sup>th</sup> 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 Kanchamkuda. 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.

### English News Papers<sup>1</sup>

- 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)

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<sup>1</sup> The Kanchamkuda incident is not reported as headlines news in the Ceylon Daily News (State owned)

### Tamil Newspapers<sup>2</sup>

- 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)<sup>3</sup>

Other than the immediately evident discrepancies in the headlines, one can also see that not even a single Tamil language newspaper used the ‘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 an extreme Sinhala nationalist line on the Akkareipattu incident. This anomaly between the daily Divaina and weekend Divaina is also reflected in the carefully guised, but equally pernicious 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.

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.

## OPEN QUESTION

There is a very real sense of hopelessness amongst those who are engaged in media reform that the situation in Sri Lanka is too complex and convoluted for any real change to take place. Ideally, the news media should serve as a forum for constructive debate involving a wide spectrum of opinion.

But the question is, is this possible in Sri Lanka? Given the historical antecedents, the concretised mindsets of editors who react violently against change and reform, and the deeply conservative nature of ethnic ownership, it is not impossible to think that media in Sri Lanka will continue to be tri-lateral, disturbingly ethno-centric and divisive.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> There is one other Tamil daily, Thinakkathir, which operated 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.

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 reliability<sup>4</sup> – 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.
- 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 issues regarding the contesting hegemonies of the press in Sri Lanka. When online media and journalism in Sri Lanka mirrors print journalism, one can safely say that the need for reform in the media has never been more urgent. The media in Sri Lanka, as media anywhere else, will always be characterised by a combination of all the factors flagged above, and it is up to forward thinking 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.

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<sup>4</sup> See also An Operational Framework for Media and Peacebuilding, Ross Howard, IMPACS, 2002

<sup>5</sup> See also Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002