

REPORT ON THE PERFORMANCE OF THE NON- STATE ELECTRONIC MEDIA DURING THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF OCTOBER 2000

Preface

This Report on the Performance of the Non- State Electronic Media During the Parliamentary Elections of October 2000 is the counterpart of the Report by INFORM on The Publicly Funded Electronic Media. The Reports were prepared in collaboration with Article 19 and with the generous assistance of NORAD, The Asia Foundation and the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

The issue of media performance at the time of elections is an extremely pertinent one for a variety of reasons. Of especial importance is the division within Sri Lanka between state and non-state media and the impact this has on the performance of the media during election time. Issues of agenda setting, partisan bias and stereotype invariably surface and in turn confirm that partisan allegiance characterizes media in Sri Lanka irrespective of type of ownership and management. Consequently, the role of the media in helping citizens to make informed choices at elections is seriously diminished and the need for greater professionalism in the media reinforced.

This Report highlights these issues through an analysis of election reportage. It concludes with a set of recommendations which have been classified into the mandatory and the voluntary. CPA believes that the issue of media reportage at election times is integral to strengthening the institutions of a functioning democracy in Sri Lanka and of fundamental importance in enhancing the contribution of civil society to better governance.

This Report, its conclusions and recommendations are presented in this spirit and in the hope that electronic media reportage at election time can develop in the near future, into an example of media best practice in Sri Lanka.

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Executive Summary

Sinhala, Tamil and English programmes on thirteen non-state television and radio channels in Sri Lanka were monitored during the Parliamentary Election Campaign of October 2000 to determine the extent to which the non-state media performed as a disseminator of voter education and information about competing parties during the campaign period. The television and radio channels surveyed, with network affiliation, are as follows:

MBC Network: MTV, Sirasa TV, Sirasa FM, Shakthi FM, Yes FM

EAP Network: Swarnawahini television, Shree FM, Swarna Oli

Telshan Network: TNL TV, TNL Radio, Isira FM

ABC Network: Gold FM, Sooriyan FM

All non-state media in Sri Lanka are highly commercial ventures.

The survey findings, based on both qualitative and quantitative data analysis, revealed how most non-state media sacrificed the discussion of substantive issues in favour of narrow, partisan political ends. The main political debates created around the cost of living, the ethnic conflict, economic and political reform, education policy and other issues of concern were subsumed in personalised attacks and specific malpractices. Fact was often confused with comment, especially in the more partisan Telshan network. The political debates most often took the form of a PA-UNP opposition with the JVP (considered a “third force”), and the Sinhala Urumaya receiving considerable coverage.

Those television and radio channels that reflected less bias and subjectivity, such as the MBC and ABC channels, carried minimal discussion programmes. Those more prone to partisan as well as majoritarian politics, such as **TNL** and, to a lesser extent, **Swarnawahini**, consisted of more discussion and “news show” programming. Ethnic minority and leftist parties received little positive coverage, and little analysis of their alternative policy standpoints was provided. Civil society representatives were brought in only on issues of election violence and party-based politics, and were clearly absent in debates about economic, political and social reform. The Tamil radio channel **Sooriyan FM** was an exception in this regard with substantially more exposure given to ethnic minority parties even though the channel consisted of only news programming.

A qualitative analysis of the two main discussion programmes *Jana Handa* (**TNL TV**) and *Rathu Ira* (**Swarnawahini**) for the period under consideration demonstrated considerable bias in the opinions aired: only 1% of the time spent discussing the ethnic conflict in each programme was allocated in favour of an unequivocally anti-war stand. *Rathu Ira* also spent as much as 32% of the time allocated for discussing the ethnic conflict in invoking racism, rather than dealing with substantive issues of conflict resolution and political dialogue.

In sharp contrast to the state media, there was disproportionate coverage of the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) with data on news coverage alone for all non-state channels showing 421 instances (59%) of direct coverage of UNP statements during the period under survey, as opposed to only 297 for the PA.

The disparity was even greater in radio programming, with 216 instances (61%) of direct coverage of the UNP contrasting with only 138 instances for the PA. The imbalance was most pronounced in the Sinhala news bulletins and Sinhala radio channels.

Overall, other than for the **TNL** radio and television channels, and **Swarnawahini** television, very little election-related programming was detected over non-state radio and television during the election campaign. The Election Commissioner's Guidelines to all private media that [advertising facilities] "should be offered free of charge or on payment of a nominal and uniform fee" were regularly flouted and instead, the elections were used for profit maximization. In addition, No-Campaign Guidelines, under which campaigning was prohibited during the 48 hours immediately preceding the poll, were often flouted by **TNL**.

There was no effective regulation of bias and imbalance in the non-state media coverage of parties and candidates during the election. This was due both to the lack of clear guidelines and laws governing these media, and the failure of media authorities to adhere to guidelines that do exist.

Section 1

Monitoring Non-State Media During the Parliamentary Election Campaign of October 2000

1. Introduction to the Survey

The monitoring of non-state media during the run-up to the Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections, October 10th, 2000, was undertaken to determine the extent to which the private media performed as an alternative to the state media in civic education and the provision of voter information. Four non-state television channels, **MTV**, **Sirasa**, **TNL** and **Swarnawahini** were monitored for the period September 13th – October 9th. Eight non-state radio channels were monitored for the period September 20th to October 9th. The ninth, **Sooriyan FM**, was monitored from September 27th to October 9th. The Sinhala radio stations monitored were **Shree**, **Isira** and **Sirasa FM**. The Tamil radio channels monitored were **Shakthi FM**, **Sooriyan** and **Swarna Oli**. The English radio channels monitored were **Yes FM**, **Gold FM** and **TNL Radio**.

2. Methodology

The above channels were monitored for the entire broadcast time of each channel by twenty-six recorders and 13 tabulators. All election-related content including commercial advertising was closely monitored using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Content was tabulated for the amount of time allocated for supporting and opposing political parties and for the nature of coverage given to parties – including rallies, press conferences, party statements, public functions, as perpetrators of election violence, coverage of President's and Ministers' speeches, coverage of opposition speeches, civic education issues, appeals for free and fair elections, coverage of campaign-oriented news items, coverage favouring specific candidates and coverage of election procedure.

A selection of *Jana Handa* and *Rathu Ira* discussion programmes were tabulated for substantive content for the period September 25th to October 9th. The categories included constitutional reform, the ethnic conflict, economic policy, welfare policy, environmental issues, political issues, election procedure/campaigning, general administrative issues, parliamentary procedure, party procedure, and women's issues. Each category was sub-divided into relevant sub-categories (see Charts 3.7-3.11). The week immediately leading up to the elections was also monitored for election-related content as a percentage of the entire broadcast time.

3. Introduction to Non-State Media in Sri Lanka

Television in Sri Lanka was first launched in the non-state sector by two private entrepreneurs, including Shan Wickramasinghe, brother of the present Leader of the Opposition (United National Party - UNP), Ranil Wickramasinghe. In 1979, they established the Independent Television Network (**ITN**) under the aegis of the UNP, then in power. Private media, in this sense, has always had its political affiliations.

Less than two months later, the government took over the network. Meanwhile, the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) Act launched its channel **Rupavahini**, a public channel, in 1982.

Until 1992, television remained a state monopoly with **ITN** and **Rupavahini** being the only channels in operation. In 1992, the government opened up the media sector to allow private television channels under the control and supervision of the SLRC. Now, six private channels are in operation, namely Telshan Network Limited (**TNL**) (owned by the brother of the Leader of the Opposition), Maharaja Television (**MTV**), **Sirasa**, **Swarnawahini**, Extra Terrestrial Television (**ETV**) and **Dynavision**, the last two channels consisting largely of entertainment/foreign content programming with occasional local content. **Comet television** provides cable access. Overall, non-state television remains a highly commercial venture. Certain channels have rebroadcast arrangements with international networks such as BBC, CNN and Sky Television.

There is a relatively high rate (regionally) of television ownership in the country with the *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook* of 1999 showing 9.2 receivers per every 100 inhabitants.

Twelve non-state radio stations have been launched since the government relaxed its monopoly over radio broadcasting in 1984. They offer five English services, **E-FM**, **TNL 90/101.7 FM**, **Yes FM**, **Sun FM 99.99**, and **Gold FM 89.8**; five Sinhala services – **Sirasa**, **Shree FM**, **Isira FM**, **Hiru FM 107.9** and **Tharu FM 96.7**, and three Tamil services **Swarna Oli**, **Shakthi FM** and **Sooriyan FM**. **Sirasa FM** and **TNL Radio** are also accessible through the Internet. Radio by far remains the most utilized broadcast medium in the country with the 1999 *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook* showing 20.6 receivers per 100 inhabitants in 1995.

The ownership of monitored television and radio channels are as follows:

MBC Network: MTV, Sirasa TV, Sirasa FM, Shakthi FM, Yes FM
EAP Network: Swarnawahini television, Shree FM, Swarna Oli
Telshan Network: TNL TV, TNL Radio, Isira FM
ABC Network: Gold FM, Sooriyan

Dynavision and **Extra-Terrestrial Television** were not monitored because of their largely foreign/entertainment programming content. The radio channels **E-FM** of the EAP network and **Hiru**, **Tharu** and **Sun FM** of the ABC network were also not included for these reasons.

3.1 Island-Wide Reception

Most non-state television and radio channels reach about two thirds of the island, excluding the North, and sometimes certain pockets of the Eastern region. **Swarnawahini** claims to reach the entire island including the North, and even South India. MTV is reported to reach Greater Colombo and a few Southern towns. English radio channels generally serve urban and suburban areas with a concentration on Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Nuwara Eliya and Trincomalee. The Tamil **Sooriyan FM**

channel is islandwide and concentrates on the hill country plantation sectors with about 90-95% reach in the region. Regional radio stations are also popular among listeners.

3.2 Audience and Advertising Share

Television Audience Share – Sept/Oct 2000

Television Channel	% of Audience Share
Rupavahini	65.25
Sirasa TV	51.71
Swarnawahini	44.77
ITN	44.58
Channel Eye	27.14
TNL	19.74
MTV/Shakthi	10.68
Dynavision	2.9
ETV	2.9
Comet TV	0.08
Channel 9	0.04

(Courtesy Phoenix advertising)

Audience share statistics do not constitute a 100% as each respondent is allowed to indicate watching more than one channel.

Audience share research done at Lanka Market Research Bureau (LMRB) during the election campaign used a sample count of 5420 respondents spread in areas of the island excluding the North and East. The respondents represented a target group population of 11,680. Audience share figures for television show **Sirasa TV** receiving the highest ratings among non-state channels, with an audience share of 51.71% and **MTV** showing the lowest ratings with 10.68%, particularly due to its low rate of Sinhala programming. **TNL**, in spite of its high Sinhala programming, comes third on the list next to **Sirasa** and **Swarnawahini** out of the four channels monitored. The audience share data closely reflect the advertising share data (see below).

Radio Audience Share – Sept/Oct 2000

(Monitored channels only)

Radio Channel	% of Audience Share
Sirasa FM	61.07
Shree FM	13.34
Sooriyan FM	6.09
Shakthi FM	3.44
Isira FM	2.54
Yes FM	1.89
Swarna Oli FM	1.7
TNL Radio	1.03
Gold FM	0.71

(Courtesy Phoenix Advertising)

Audience share statistics do not constitute a 100% as each respondent is allowed to indicate watching more than one channel.

Radio audience share again reflects television audience share, company-wise, with **Sirasa FM** receiving the highest ratings, even including state radio channels. **Isira FM** receives a lower audience share than the two other Sinhala channels monitored. Out of the three Tamil channels, **Sooriyan FM** receives the highest ratings partly due to its islandwide coverage.

Advertising Share
(October 2000)

Television Channel	Advertising Revenue (Millions)	Percentage
Sirasa	52.1	26.10
Swarnawahini	40.4	20.24
Rupavahini	33.4	16.73
Eye	25.2	12.63
ITN	14.9	7.46
MTV	9.3	4.66
ETV	9.2	4.61
TNL	8.1	4.06
Dynavision	7.0	3.5
TOTAL	199.6	100

(Courtesy Survey Lanka)

Advertising share indicates a higher revenue for two non-state channels, **Sirasa** and **Swarnawahini**, over the state television channel **Rupavahini**. Again, **TNL** advertising share is the lowest among the channels monitored.

4. Contesting Parties

Altogether, around thirty main parties contested the October 2000 Parliamentary Elections. The main contestants were Sri Lanka's ruling party, the People's Alliance (PA), consisting of an alliance of political parties of various political hues, the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), with a radical left-wing history and considered a "third force" in Sri Lankan politics, and the Sihala Urumaya, a new, Sinhala nationalist party. The National Unity Alliance (NUA), consisting largely of a Muslim membership, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), and the Ealam People's Democratic Front (EPDP), two major Tamil parties, also contested. Among other leftist parties, the New Left Front and the Left and Democratic Alliance (LDF) were relatively more prominent. The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) representing Tamil plantation workers in the hill country also contested under the PA.

5. General Overview of Election Coverage on Non-State Media

The role of the mass media during the run-up to an election is a crucial means of disseminating information to the public both on voting procedure and on the political platforms of contending parties. Private broadcasting services are not generally considered an adequate substitute for publicly funded broadcasting, but they do

constitute an important forum for public debate and a vehicle for promoting the free flow of information. This role is particularly important in Sri Lanka, given the complete co-optation of the publicly funded media by the ruling party.

In general, the non-state media provided a wider, yet not comprehensive alternative to the distinctly campaign-oriented pro-government stance taken by the state electronic media (see companion report on the State media). However, coverage of election-related news was minimal on most channels except for **TNL** television/radio and **Swarnawahini**. All radio channels, for the last week leading up to the elections, devoted only 1.6% of the entire cumulative broadcast time for election-related programming.

During the period monitored, the non-state media reflected, rather than critiqued, the mudslinging campaigns undertaken by the political parties. In addition, these media made little attempt to educate voters on the diversity of political stands taken by political parties, with the option of voting for the PA or the UNP being put forward as the crucial decision, irrespective of the similarities of the manifestoes and practices of the two parties in the past. Some of the main observations of the monitoring project are:

- **TNL** and **Swarnawahini** television for the most part inflamed populist majoritarian sentiment by often invoking racism and not providing all sides of the debates on political reform. Media positions were sometimes even more extreme than positions taken by the mainstream political parties.
- Channels such as **TNL** television, **TNL Radio** and **Isira FM** were co-opted by the main opposition party, the UNP, and used specifically for narrow campaigning on its behalf.
- The more “balanced” television channels, including **MTV**, **Sirasa** and **Swarnawahini**, were characterized by a lack of investigative journalism and a failure to represent the diversity of viewpoints in the election manifestos of various contending political parties. Exceptions were slots reserved for contesting parties themselves, some Tamil radio stations, particularly **Sooriyan FM**, which dealt with policy issues and dialogue with the LTTE, and **MTV/Sirasa’s Platform 2000**, which gave voice to minority party leaders as well.
- Issues of corruption, election malpractices and election violence were seen more as party proclivities than systemic forms of political power play.
- Coverage on all channels focused on the UNP-PA contest, although the JVP and the Sihala Urumaya also received reasonable coverage.
- Parties representing ethnic minorities rarely got exposure for their manifestos, and only came into the news/discussion programmes in the event of some negative upheaval in the parties such as in the case of the National Unity Alliance’s leadership crisis after the death of its leader MHM Ashraff or the TULF whose nominations list was rejected in one District.
- Minority parties also came into the picture in the light of the dangers inherent in ethnic bargaining undertaken by the mainstream parties to procure the necessary number of seats to form a government.
- Political reform, particularly pertaining to the ethnic conflict, was presented in an overwhelmingly negative light and used as a means to discredit those promoting reform.

- Controversial minority politicians contesting with the PA, such as Varatharaja Perumal and the NUA's Sivagnanam Akileshwaran were used excessively by some channels, particularly those of the TNL group as a means of attacking the PA.
- Even channels with a vested interest in attacking the ruling party, such as **TNL**, failed to deal with substantive issues through which the PA could have been criticized constructively.
- There was neither a critical approach to manifestos, nor a balanced reporting of election violence and election malpractices.

6. Election-Related Programming Content

The time allocated for commercial advertising was not included in calculating times allocated for election-related material for each channel. The tabulation of election-related material as against the entire broadcast time was undertaken for the final week leading up to the elections – October 3rd to October 9th (see Figs. 1.1 – 1.3).

6.1 Television

Maharaja Television (MTV)

MTV broadcasts English programming and **Shakthi** (Tamil) Television. Election-related content was very poor with only 3.8% or five hours of the entire week of October 3rd to 9th being reserved for election-related content. Only news programs offered election-related news and *Campaign 2000* offered television space for contending parties in both the English and Tamil news broadcasts. *People's Verdict*, a daily segment of the news bulletins, also stressed party policy. In this sense, even though election-related material was minimal on MTV, there was relatively more diverse news content than on other channels.

Sirasa Television

Most election-related content on this channel was in daily news broadcasts in Sinhala. Other than that, occasional programmes such as *Visammuthiya* dealt with issues of election violence and civic consciousness. Only 3.99% of the final week's broadcast or five hours of the entire final week were allocated for election-related content. Again, the Sinhala version of *Campaign 2000* offered free television time to contestants. Morning discussion programmes also touched on election issues. The potential of both **MTV** and **Sirasa** to deal with substantive issues because of their relative balance, was lost because of this lack of public-conscious programming. **Sirasa**, like **MTV**, is highly focussed on entertainment programming.

TNL Television

TNL television broadcasts daily English and Sinhala news. *Jana Handa* is the channel's most popular interactive discussion programme lasting for about three hours twice a week on Mondays and Fridays during the election period. There were also *Jana Handa* programmes on a smaller scale with no phone-in interviews and

lasting around 30-45 minutes. Other than that, occasional programmes such as *Indrakeelaya* and *Pasuwadana* touched on election-related issues. The level of propaganda for the UNP was high, and its partisan nature and inflammatory style in general easily matched that of the state-controlled **Rupavahini** and **ITN** channels. However, **TNL** allocated 11 hours and 30 seconds (or 22.71% of the entire programming) for election related material during the final week leading up to the elections, more than twice the total on either **MTV** or **Sirasa**, even though it only starts broadcasting at 4.55 p.m.

Swarnawahini

Swarnawahini replaces the conventional news format with its news show format on *Live at 8* telecast every weekday from 8-9 p.m. Using a chatty approach, the programme reports news as well as engages in conversations with political party contestants and others. **Swarnawahini** also telecasts *Rathu Ira*, a discussion programme on the lines of *Jana Handa* every Tuesday and Friday of the week. *Deshapaalana Sathiya*, an informal, one-hour long news show, rounds up the main events of the week, as well as telecasting reports from regional correspondents once a week. **Swarnawahini** showed substantial allocations for election-related material on the final week leading up to the elections with 9 hours and 44 minutes or 8.79% of the entire broadcast time for the final week being allocated for election-related news. Even though the total time is similar, the percentage is lower than for **TNL** by virtue of the fact that **Swarnawahini** begins broadcasting at 8 a.m.

6.2 Sinhala Radio

Sirasa FM

Sirasa FM has 24-hour broadcasting with four news bulletins on weekdays with varying durations. The news is generally repeated throughout the day. The programme *Kathuwaki Matha* broadcasts newspaper headlines four days a week much on the lines of **Sirasa** television's morning shows. There are no daily or weekly programmes devoted to election-related issues. For the final week leading up to the elections, only three hours and 66 seconds or 2.17% of the entire broadcast time was allocated for election-related material.

Shree FM

Shree Puwath is a 5-minute news bulletin broadcast daily from 6.00 a.m. to 9 p.m. on top of the hour over Shree FM. News headlines are also summarized half past every hour. There were no specific election-related programmes. Only one hour and twenty minutes or 0.8% of the entire broadcast time for the final week before elections consisted of election-related material.

Isira Radio

Isira news is broadcast daily at 6.30 am, 12 noon and 5.00 pm for around 10 minutes. The news has a clear anti-government bias. **Isira Radio**, unlike the other two Sinhala radio channels monitored, had special discussion programmes devoted

to election-related issues. While there was a re-broadcast of the previous day's *Jana Handa* programme on **TNL** television (see Discussions section), the phone-in discussion programme *Ilakkaya* dealt with election-related issues, once more with a clear anti-government bias. The channel broadcasts for twelve hours until 6.00 pm only. Out of the radio channels, **Isira Radio** had the highest percentage of time allocated for election-related material with 5 hours 19 minutes or 6.33% of the final week leading up to the elections being allocated for the purpose.

6.3 Tamil Radio

Sooriyan FM

Sooriyan FM broadcasts news four times a day at 6.45 a.m., 12.30 p.m., 6.30 p.m. and 9.15 p.m. Each news bulletin consists of local, foreign and sports news lasting for 10 minutes each. The station did not give prominence to election rallies and completely ignored inflammatory news stories such as the Ranil-LTTE agreement, the President's correspondences with the LTTE and so on. Upcountry news and upcountry politicians, largely representing the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC) received a greater coverage than on other Tamil radio channels. Overall, **Sooriyan FM** allocated only 95 minutes and 63 seconds or 0.95% of the entire broadcast time for the last week before elections for election-related coverage, consisting solely of news items. No election-related discussion programmes were aired.

Swarna Oli

Swarna Oli broadcasts news in brief for a duration of two minutes or less on top of the hour. Most of the news items are repeated on several bulletins during the day and on the following day. Though not slanted towards any party, the eastern province and the NUA received relatively more coverage than on other radio channels. No discussion programmes were aired. Again, only 75 minutes and 52 seconds or 0.75% of the entire broadcast time for the final week leading up to the elections was allocated for election-related material, all of them consisting of news items.

Shakthi FM

News bulletins covering local, business and foreign news are broadcast for a duration of 10 minutes at 7 a.m., 1 p.m., 6.30 p.m. and 8.15 p.m. daily. This station, the sister station of **MTV**, provided slightly more election news than the other two Tamil television stations monitored. The station more or less reflected the contents of the **MTV** and **Sirasa** television channels. No discussion programmes were aired. Only 112 minutes or 1.11% of the entire broadcast time consisted of election-related material for the final week before elections.

6.4 English Radio

TNL Radio

TNL Radio broadcasts its news bulletins daily on top of the hour from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. for approximately 5 minutes. The channel clearly supported the UNP. There were no discussion programmes related to the elections. Out of the English channels monitored, **TNL Radio** recorded the highest time allocation for election-related material with 53 minutes and 2 seconds or 1% for the final week before elections being allocated for election-related material.

Gold FM

Gold FM broadcasts news four times a day at 7.30 a.m., 12.30 p.m., 7.30 p.m., and 10.30 p.m. seven days of the week. Only 28 minutes and 49 seconds, or 0.45%, of the programming the week prior to polling was election-related.

YES FM

YES FM broadcasts news daily from 5 a.m. to 12 midnight except on Saturdays when the final news broadcast is at 8 p.m. Each news broadcast lasts for roughly five minutes. There is relatively more balance than on **TNL/ Isira** radio. Only 59 minutes or 0.65% of the entire broadcast time was allocated for election-related material (see Fig. 1.3).

7. Guidelines, Law and Election Coverage

All non-state television and radio channels, as in the case of the state media (see state media report), flouted the Election Commissioner's Guidelines pertaining specifically to the private media. These stipulate that:

[P]olitical parties and independent groups contesting the elections should be permitted to utilize facilities on private channels based on the principle of equity.

The stipulations pertaining to private media are as follows:

- 1) *Such facilities should be provided on an equitable basis to every party/group.*
- 2) *If such facilities can be increased, such increase should also be on an equitable basis.*
- 3) *Such facilities should be offered free of charge or on payment of a nominal and uniform fee.*
- 4) *Parties/candidates should not use any facilities over and above their allocations, even if offered, because it will constitute an act of discrimination against others.*

In spite of these guidelines, parties made optimum use of the commercial possibilities of the election campaign. According to sources at **TNL's** Commercial

Unit, the television channel charged around Rs. 25,000 to 30,000 for a 15-minute programme and sent out brochures with rates included to all political candidates.

MTV and **Sirasa** channels also charged commercial rates for political advertising with Rs. 7000 being charged for a 15-second radio advertisement and Rs. 30,000 being charged for a 15-second television advertisements. A 30-second ad on radio cost Rs. 8,500 and Rs. 40,000 on television. A 45-second advertisement cost Rs 15,000 on radio and a 60-second advertisement cost Rs.50,000 on radio.

In this way, political parties with capital backing such as the UNP, PA, and Sihala Urumaya, were able to make disproportionate use of the electronic media for their campaigns in an inequitable manner. Some occasionally telecast documentary-style and interview-format advertisements which were made to look like productions initiated by the channel itself. Examples of these were a documentary-style extended campaign piece for Sihala Urumaya's Champika Ranawaka and another one in interview format featuring the Rev. Bangamuve Nayaka Thero of the Sihalaye Mahasammatha Bhumiputra Party. In the latter case, the inordinate exposure given to a relatively minor party was clearly noticeable. Similarly, minor contestants, such as the People's Party's P.C. Abeywardena were able to buy extended air time on **TNL**.

Swarnawahini refused to provide us with advertising rates. While **MTV** allowed airtime to participants on Campaign 2000, **Swarnawahini** allowed policy statements to be publicized in an interactive manner through *Live at 8* (see Discussions section).

The ABC Channel's **Gold FM** and **Sooriyan FM** charged special rates and no free time was allowed for contestants to put forward their election manifestoes. A 15-second prime time advertisement cost contestants Rs. 5000, but only Rs. 3,000 during normal hours. A 30-second prime-time advertisement cost Rs. 7000 and Rs. 5000 during normal hours. According to sources at the Marketing Unit of ABC, the rates charged for political advertising was in fact higher than the normal advertising rates.

While the Commissioner's Guidelines in Sri Lanka allow for the charge of a nominal fee for political advertising during elections, certain countries go even further to ensure the equitable distribution of media time to political parties. Paid political advertising is entirely disallowed in the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and is not permitted during election campaigns in Austria, France, Israel and Japan. Paid political advertising is also prohibited in Ireland and Spain. Strong recommendations have been made by European Broadcast Law experts to suspend paid advertising by political parties, if such advertising exists, during an election campaign¹.

The Election Commissioner's guidelines also state that:

All radio and television broadcasters should refrain from broadcasting / telecasting giving publicity to any programme likely to be construed as biased and partisan towards any party to the fray.

¹ Guidelines for Election Broadcasting in Transitional Democracies, Article 19 Publication, 1994/97, p.19.

The rules on balance were most glaringly flouted by **TNL** television, with data on Sinhala television news for the entire survey period, for example, showing merely 7.05 minutes in support of the PA and an inordinate 90.46 minutes spent opposing the ruling party. The same news bulletins spent 28.2 minutes supporting the UNP and only 1.46 minutes for the entire month opposing it.

The non-state media are not legislated under election media law.

8. The No-Campaign Period

A No-Campaign period was stipulated by the Election Commissioner from midnight, October 7th until the actual polling day, i.e. for the 48 hours immediately preceding voting. This period is meant to be free of political campaigning of any sort as political parties and contestants will have insufficient time to respond to inaccurate/unfair criticism during the time immediately preceding the elections.

The non-state channels that most blatantly flouted the no-campaign regulations were **TNL** television and **Isira** of the TNL group, both of which broadcast political advertising, and clearly campaign-oriented news items (see News Section) meant to support the UNP. Other television and radio channels generally abided by the No-Campaign guidelines.

Section 2

News Reportage

All non-state broadcast media apart from **TNL Television, Swarnawahini** and **Isira**, presented almost the entirety of their election-related material in news bulletins. A few occasional discussion programmes were monitored for other channels, but they were negligible.

1. Television

Out of the three television channels broadcasting news, **MTV, Sirasa** and **TNL, MTV** (English and Tamil news) and **Sirasa** Television (MTV Sinhala news) had a relatively non-partisan approach to election reportage (see charts 2.1 – 2.3). The programmes on those channels were also more investigative with reporters going “out” to find news stories more than was the case on TNL.

1.1 Opposing and Supporting Political Parties

As a whole, **Sirasa** Sinhala news, and its English and Tamil versions on **MTV** showed marked similarities in their approaches to political parties (see Figs. 2.1 – 2.3). Out of the three main political parties – the PA, the UNP and the JVP – the PA received the most coverage with more than 70 minutes spent supporting the party on **MTV** English news and **Sirasa** Sinhala news for the period under survey. Tamil news had relatively less time allocated for election-related news overall. **MTV** Tamil news gave more coverage to the National Unity Alliance and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), as well as to the Ceylon Worker’s Congress (CWC), all minority parties with manifestoes diverging widely from those of the main political parties. The New Left Front, again campaigning on a leftist manifesto, received more coverage on the **MTV** English news bulletins than on either the Sinhala or Tamil sister channels. The Sinhala Urumaya received markedly less coverage on MTV Tamil news than on either the Sinhala or English bulletins.

TNL news, like the discussion programmes aired by the channel, showed a marked pro-UNP campaign tack. Almost 90 minutes was spent by TNL Sinhala news bulletins for opposing the PA. Only 1.46 minutes was spent opposing the UNP. Around 28 minutes were spent by the Sinhala news bulletins to support the UNP. The bias of the TNL English bulletins were more or less on similar lines. There is no Tamil news bulletin on **TNL**. All minority parties, unlike the three main parties, received more negative coverage than positive coverage. (see Figs. 2.1 and 2.2)

The TNL network in its entirety (see Fig. 2.16) barely gave coverage to parties other than the three main contenders – the PA, UNP and JVP. The remaining three networks gave relatively more coverage to other parties.

1.2 Coverage of Rallies, Speeches, Statements and Public Functions

CHANNEL	PA	UNP	JVP	SU	NUA	SLMC	PP	NLF	LSSP	OTHERS
MTV	46	48	25	15	01	11	18	05	00	23
SHAKTHI TV	49	41	18	16	04	04	23	03	00	15
SIRASA TV	55	45	34	13	00	00	02	06	01	17
TNL-TV ENG	04	16	06	00	00	00	00	00	00	15
TNL-TV SIN	05	55	29	01	00	00	00	00	00	40

While **Sirasa** TV news, and **MTV** Tamil and English television news covered rallies, speeches, statements and public functions more or less equitably, at least where the main parties were concerned, both **TNL** Sinhala and English news gave priority to the UNP and JVP over any other party. However, the UNP was given much more publicity over **TNL** Sinhala news than over **TNL** English news. While the **TNL** channel itself takes on a largely Sinhala nationalist tack (see Discussions section), they gave almost no direct publicity, except for one segment, to the main Sinhala nationalist party, the Sihala Urumaya.

1.3 Election Violence Committed by Political Parties

CHANNEL	PA	UNP	JVP	SU	NUA	SLMC	PP	NLF	LSSP	OTHERS
MTV	09	07	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	04
SHAKTHI TV	15	02	02	02	01	00	00	00	00	06
SIRASA TV	08	05	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	30
TNL-TV ENG	19	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	07
TNL-TV SIN	50	02	00	00	01	02	00	00	00	03

A viewer of **TNL** television's direct coverage (as opposed to the coverage of police, CMEV statements etc.) of election violence news would easily be of the impression that only the PA perpetrated violence during the period leading up to the elections, that PA contestants and supporters were not victimized by election violence at all, and that the UNP were not perpetrators of election violence, only its victims. **TNL** Sinhala news reported as many as 50 acts of violence by the PA and only 2 by the UNP, and 2 by the SLMC, a complete distortion of actual violence statistics available from the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) (see the CMEV report for the October 2000 elections). The three **MTV** news bulletins however had a more balanced approach to the reportage of election violence with **MTV** English news reporting 9 acts of violence by the PA, 7 acts of violence by the UNP, and 2 acts of violence by the JVP. **Sirasa** TV news reported 8 acts of violence by the PA, 5 by the UNP and 1 by the JVP.

1.4 Civic Education and Party Platforms

CHANNEL	PA	UNP	JVP	SU	NUA	SLMC	PP	NLF	LSSP	OTHER
MTV	01	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	25
SHAKTHI TV	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	25

SIRASA TV	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	25
TNL-TV ENG	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	05
TNL-TV SIN	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	20

Civic education and education on party platforms encompass imparting information to the public on how, when and where to vote, the importance of using the ballot, as well as imparting information needed for voters to understand the party platforms and issues. Although Sri Lanka's high literacy rate and established electoral tradition means that much of the electorate already knows how to vote, voter education programmes are still important both to remind everyone of the practicalities of voting and because there remain less empowered communities for whom the ballot paper and voting procedure are unfamiliar.

In general, all channels provided voters with information about election procedures, including voting by post and early voting, and how to prevent the misuse of polling cards.

There was very little information about party platforms and policy issues included in non-state television news, except for **MTV's** (English and Tamil) and **Sirasa's Campaign 2000**, which allowed airtime for political party contestants to talk about their manifestoes. *People's Verdict*, telecast over all three **MTV** channels, also gave more policy-oriented excerpts from political party rallies and interviews which were directed towards civic education. *People's Verdict* also gave voice to minority party manifestoes, a rare feature on non-state television channels. Most of the *People's Verdict* excerpts were a contrast to the habitual excerpts focussing on the mudslinging undertaken by political parties at rallies, and used enthusiastically by channels such as **TNL**. However, the effects of slots such as those on *Campaign 2000* can be counterproductive if this proliferation of messages merely serves to dilute the implications of the party manifestoes of the main parties². With no substitute programming to address prominent party platforms then, these slots have the possibility of confusing voters.

2. Radio News

2.1 Opposing and Supporting Political Parties

The sister channels of **MTV** and **TNL** generally reflected the same trends as their television stations (see Figs. 2.6 – 2.14). Only **Shakthi** Radio of the **MTV** group diverged a little in having allocated relatively more time in opposing, rather than supporting the PA. **Gold FM** of the ABC network, seem to largely support the UNP with little time being spent criticizing the party, whereas its Tamil sister channel **Sooriyan FM** represented at least seven more political parties than the English sister channel, particularly minority Tamil parties. **Sooriyan** was also the only radio/TV channel to allocate more time to oppose, rather than support the JVP, a political party that promotes a military solution to the ethnic conflict.

² *Guidelines for Election Broadcasting in Transitional Democracies*, (Article 19, 1994/7), p.20.

The TNL radio stations, on the other hand, showed a clear partisan reportage in its overwhelming opposition of the PA, and lack of opposition of the UNP.

2.2 Coverage of Rallies, Statements, Public Functions and Election Violence

CHANNEL	PA	UNP	JVP	SU	NUA	SLMC	PP	NLF	LSSP	OTHERS
YES FM	16	10	07	02	02	02	01	00	00	02
GOLD FM	09	18	07	08	00	05	00	00	00	03
TNL FM	07	12	05	00	05	00	00	00	00	04
ISIRA FM	05	57	15	02	00	02	01	00	00	04
SHREE FM	19	32	24	00	00	03	00	00	00	06
SIRASA FM	42	72	22	06	07	02	04	00	00	18
SWAR-OLI	20	10	07	00	00	03	00	00	00	06
SOORIYAN*	02	01	02	00	01	01	00	00	00	08
SHAKTHI FM	18	44	08	01	04	05	00	00	00	17

*Sooriyan FM was surveyed for the period Sept 27th to Oct 9th only

There was generally more coverage of rallies, statements and public functions of the UNP than the PA, with the JVP receiving considerable coverage on most radio channels. Even **Shree FM** and **Sirasa FM** gave inordinate coverage to the UNP as compared to the PA with 216 instances of direct coverage for the UNP contrasting with only 138 instances of direct coverage of the PA. Reporting of election violence was again on the same lines as the television channels with **Isira FM** presenting 36 cases against the PA and 11 against the UNP. **Gold FM** and **Yes FM** reported an equal number of violations from both the PA and the UNP. Civic education items were minimal on all radio channels.

2.3 Election Violence Committed by Political Parties

CHANNEL	PA	UNP	JVP	SU	NUA	SLMC	PP	NLF	LSSP	OTHERS
YES FM	11	11	02	00	00	02	00	00	00	02
GOLD FM	14	14	03	00	00	00	00	00	00	02
TNL FM	04	05	05	00	04	00	00	00	00	09
ISIRA FM	36	11	03	00	00	01	00	00	00	09
SHREE FM	16	09	00	00	01	01	00	00	00	36
SIRASA FM	04	07	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	91
SWAR-OLI	05	08	02	00	00	01	00	00	00	07
SOORIYAN*	09	11	00	00	01	00	00	00	00	63
SHAKTHI FM	09	05	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	60

*Sooriyan FM was surveyed for the period Sept 27th to Oct 9th only

2.4 Coverage of Civic Education Issues

CHANNEL	PA	UNP	JVP	SU	NUA	SLMC	PP	NLF	LSSP	OTHERS
YES FM	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00
GOLD FM	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	02
TNL FM	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00
ISIRA FM	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	02
SHREE FM	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	04
SIRASA FM	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	15
SWAR-OLI	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	04
SOORIYAN*	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	02
SHAKTHI FM	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	02

*Sooriyan FM was surveyed for the period Sept 27th to Oct 9th only

3. Redressing Unfair Coverage

Steps have been taken in certain countries to redress the unfair coverage of political parties. In the Bangladeshi elections of 1991, for example, a “formula was drawn up for television evening news, which provided that when one of the two major political alliances was featured in the lead story, the next broadcast would feature the other.”³ However, how effective such approaches would be in Sri Lanka in relation to non-state broadcasters is debatable.

4. Sample Television News Analysis: October 5th – October 9th

A close analysis of news items broadcast over **TNL** and **MTV** television stations for the five days leading up to the elections showed interesting disparities as well as similarities between the approaches taken by the two channels to election “news”. While the alleged Memorandum of Understanding agreed upon by the LTTE and the UNP (see Sub-Section 5) formed the backdrop for much of the news items broadcast over the two channels, the way in which **TNL** was appealing to popular sentiment through the broadcast of selective news was clear.

TNL was overtly campaigning for the UNP before and after the no-campaign period was announced, with party statements, quotes from the Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, and telecast of footage from rallies that were made with an assumption of a guaranteed UNP victory. In contrast, the **MTV** channels broadcast more balanced election predictions including a Presidential statement that the PA has the strength and the courage to face the challenges of the future.

Specific examples of the trends noted above include the following:

³ Ibid., p.27.

TNL Television – Party Bias

- On October 7th, **TNL** quoted the results of polls conducted by the University of Peradeniya that reflected public opinion in favour of the UNP. The exaggerated presentation of PA conspiracies were another tendency over **TNL**.
- The **TNL** news bulletins of October 5th also spoke of a “cunning” (*koota*) plan by the PA to publicise that it is dysfunctional to have the President in one party and the ruling party to be another. This kind of emotive language is not uncommon over **TNL** news broadcasts.
- It also gave negative publicity to the PA during the period by highlighting allegations against the government that monies allocated for the Employers’ Trust Fund had disappeared.
- On October 8th, during the No-Campaign Period, **TNL** continued its propaganda campaign for the UNP with reports of the President’s statements on the previous day’s *Rathu Ira* (**Swarnawahini**) that she would somehow pass the Constitutional reform bill in parliament after elections. The *Rathu Ira* moderator was also criticized for not supporting the Opposition leader’s demand for a television debate with the President and for concentrating on the PA’s policy statement instead.
- In a context where the women’s movement barely gets exposure on **TNL**, their protest against the maltreatment of Susanthika Jayasinghe, Sri Lankan Bronze medal winner at the 2000 Olympics, by government officials, was given much publicity the day before elections.

TNL Television – War and Political Negotiations

- On October 5th, in a telecast of rallies held in the East of the country, **TNL** news bulletins gave significance to the fact that the Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe had thanked the armed forces and the police for providing him with protection. This had the effect, whether intentional or not, of dampening the doubts created in the state media as well as in other media, of Wickramasinghe’s conspiracy with the LTTE and the rumoured protection given him by the militant group.
- Even though the PA had undertaken a fresh offensive in the North-East as a campaign strategy, war news was not telecast during these five days on **TNL**. Thus nationalist invocations were limited to those that would prop up the image of the UNP rather than the PA. This was in keeping with the rest of the survey period when news of military offensives were kept to a minimum on **TNL**. Reports from the war front mostly included those of losses to the military, or highlighting the falsity of government reports from the war front, such as about the death of an LTTE leader (October 2nd). **TNL**, by its own admission, (September 26th **TNL** news) is often left out of government-sponsored trips to Jaffna organized for journalists.
- On October 8th, an item presenting the views of opposition parties and the Maha Sangha on the PA’s “*rata bedana prathipattiya*” (policy towards dividing the country) was telecast. Sihala Urumaya’s Patali Champika Ranawake, in one of the two times he received exposure on the same news bulletin, interviewed by **TNL**, said that this statement by the President showed the façade (i.e of militarism) put on by the Prime Minister, Dinesh Gunewardena and Mahinda Rajapakse. The next news item was a UNP press conference and a JVP

statement again speaking of the President's plans to pass the constitution and the *Hindu* newspaper's prediction of the PA's faltering support base was also repeated.

- In a similar news item on October 9th, the National Association of the Maha Sangha and the Rev. Asgiriye Budharakhitha Thero were allowed to air anti-political reform sentiments, in the absence of other points of view.
- **TNL** also publicised the President's plans to engage again in Constitutional reform once elections were over (October 7th) in an inflammatory manner that saw the entire process as a threat to the unity of the nation.

MTV - War and Political Negotiations

- In contrast to **TNL** news, **MTV** and **Sirasa** news bulletins had regular news segments from the war front, mostly quoting government sources. **MTV** quoted state sources on the war on three of the five days. One story noted that 17 LTTE cadres had been killed by the army, and another referred to attacks on the Ampara police by the LTTE (October 5th). **MTV** also noted and a "successful" counter-attack against the LTTE by the army in Vadamarachchi, the death of two LTTE cadres in a forces attack in Jaffna, injuries inflicted on soldiers in the north (October 7th), the death of one person in a LTTE attack in Jaffna, and the complete destruction of a LTTE naval vessel by the navy, as well as a successful destruction of an LTTE navy base in Kalmunai.

MTV – Election Violence

- Election violence reported by **MTV** included an incident against a Samurdhi leader (PA), a JVP supporter and against Ravi Karunanayake's (UNP) supporters. There was also a summary of election violence against parties on October 6th that made clear the complicity/victimization of candidates from all parties in election violence with a predominance of violence conducted by the PA.

Overall, during this period, **MTV** news bulletins concentrated on issues of free and fair elections and democracy while **TNL** made a concerted campaign-oriented effort in favour of the UNP.

5. Reportage of the UNP's Alleged Secret Memorandum with the LTTE

The campaign-oriented press conference held by the PA's Ratnasiri Wickramanayake on an alleged Memorandum of Understanding between the LTTE and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe (UNP), was given significant coverage by all the television and radio channels monitored except for the two Tamil radio stations **Swarna Oli** (a sister channel of **Swarnawahini** television – EAP network) and **Sooriyan** (ABC Network). While the goal of the more partisan private channels was clearly to defend the Opposition Leader on the issue, the broadcasts implicitly and explicitly presented as criminal any attempts at dialogue with the LTTE as a means of solving the ethnic conflict.

The approach to this story by all stations except the two Tamil radio stations overlooked the fact that attempts at agreements and dialogue with the LTTE, most of

it covert, have been customary with all governments and political groups since the early days of the ethnic conflict. However, it has been the nature of Sri Lankan media to cover these issues in an inflammatory manner, often with racist overtones, delegitimising the whole process of political dialogue. The history of such stories began early in the conflict with former President Ranasingha Premadasa's attempts at dialogue with the LTTE, and the visits of many politicians and political activists to Jaffna in efforts at making peace with the LTTE.

The fact that the "secret memorandum" story was generally perceived as "news" was based in part on a number of news items and discussion programmes leading up to it. These included inflammatory stories of PA "connections" with the LTTE, as in the overdone issue of the Varatharaja Perumal case, the continued denials by political parties about their attempts at dialogue and connections with the LTTE (for an outline of both issues see survey of discussions), reports of LTTE security for the UNP, and allegations of PA correspondences with the LTTE (**TNL** news item, 25th September).

The contents of the so-called memorandum was not examined in any of the electronic media. Most of the conditions in the memorandum of understanding were nothing new in peace making efforts in the country. The fact that it contained a number of strategies for resolving the ethnic conflict which have been dwelt on in the past was not discussed. These strategies included a request of the UNP to protest the war in which "Tamil civilians and the poor Sinhala youth are being killed", protesting the emergency, a rather undemocratic clause on silence over LTTE violence, the LTTE's approval of the UNP's attitude towards the PA's Lakshman Kadirgamar, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, and support for the LTTE's policy of a homeland. The language itself was not so much that of a memorandum of understanding as a set of stipulations set down by the LTTE for the UNP to follow. "Our" in the document meant the LTTE OR, quite differently, the Tamil community they claim to represent. None of these issues was discussed.

5.1 Television

- Of the three television channels broadcasting conventional news broadcasts – **MTV**, **Sirasa** (MTV Group) and **TNL** -- **MTV** and **Sirasa** had significantly more balanced coverage of the issue by giving voice both to the PA press conference that "exposed" the UNP's secret agreement and to the Opposition Leader's comments on the allegations made against him, as well as comments by the UNP Spokesperson Karunasena Kodithuwakku on the issue of filing a complaint at Police Headquarters against the state media for their allegations against the Opposition Leader on this issue. News items on the issue were telecast on October 05th and 06th.
- **TNL** did not carry the story of the PA press conference exposing the alleged memorandum, but did broadcast the denial of the Opposition Leader over the allegations on October 5th and 6th. While **TNL** gave priority to the Opposition Leader's denials by leading with the item on both the 5th and 6th, **MTV** gave less priority to the issue with it appearing as the second news item on the 5th and as the fifth news item on the 6th.

- However, there was a clear difference between the balance of the content and the bias of the comment on **MTV**. While exposure was given to the opinion of both sides by the Maharaja group in their Sinhala, Tamil and English news broadcasts, other forms of bias were manifested. For example, the **MTV** English news carried the press conference of October 5th, including a clip of Ratnasiri Wickramayake making derisive comments about the Norwegian attempts at mediation. This had the potential of skewing audience opinion on the issue of dialogue with the LTTE, particularly since Norway has received a lot of negative coverage over their role as potential mediators in the ethnic conflict by many media groups in the country.
- The opinion of facilitators on the ethnic conflict was not sought by any of the channels/groups.
- There was also little meaningful commentary over the **MTV** channels on the bigger picture of various political parties' attempted dialogue with the LTTE.
- **TNL** sensationalized the story with inflammatory, racist material that was meant to be a backlash at the PA over their own connections with the LTTE. An *Ukusu Esa* programme on October 6th, repeated on October 8th, attacked PA supporters and contestants on their reported connections with the LTTE, giving minute details substantiated by correspondence and documentation (see survey of discussion programmes for more on this issue as well as prior allegations made against the PA on other **TNL** programmes).
- **Swarnawahini**'s extended news programme *Live at 8* gave publicity to the issue on the 5th of October through the press conference held by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake and S.B. Dissanayake. As on **Sirasa** and **MTV**, the views of UNP Spokesperson Karunasena Kodithuwakku were aired, as was Ranil Wickramasinghe's denial of the allegations.
- Typical of the nationalist stance of television stations, S.L. Gunasekara, the then President of the Sinhala Urumaya, a party with a uncompromisingly militarist approach to the ethnic conflict, was asked for his views on the subject on **Swarnawahini**. Again, more pacifist groups who were open to discussions between the main political parties and the LTTE were not given an opportunity to air their views.

5.2 Radio

- On October 5th **Gold FM** reported that the UNP strongly denied having any agreement with the LTTE. The report quoted the Chairman of the UNP, Karu Jayasuriya, stating that the documents handed out to the media by the Presidential Secretariat were false.
- On October 5th **TNL Radio** reported the incident as an attempt by President Chandrika Kumaratunge's government to link the UNP to the LTTE which has drawn "sharp and angry reactions". The **TNL Radio** broadcast was very emotive, using words like "sharp and angry reactions", and quoted Ranil Wickramasinghe at length on the PA's political and moral bankruptcy.
- **Yes FM** reported the story on October 6th with a statement by Ranil Wickramasinghe that the UNP had no memorandum of understanding with the LTTE.

- Sinhala radio news broadcasts as a whole reported the accusation a day later than the English news broadcasts. On the 6th of October **Sirasa** carried a denial by the Leader of the Opposition against the allegations but did not cover the PA press conference. **Isira** also reported on the denial and not the original PA accusation.
- Only one of the three Tamil radio channels, **Shakthi** of the Maharaja Group (**MTV** and **Sirasa**) broadcast the news item on October 5th and 6th in a way that more or less reflected the **MTV** and **Sirasa** television news. **Swarna Oli** reported on the 3rd of September on a **Thinakural** newspaper headline where the PA stated that the LTTE were going to provide security for Ranil in the East.
- At **Sooriyan FM**, according to reliable sources, the story was cut, not at the **Sooriyan** newsroom, but at the main newsroom at the ABC network. The reasons for this are not clear, even though this silence could be construed as an implicit statement about the channel's stand on populist issues such as "connections with the LTTE". On October 9th however, **Sooriyan FM**, in a 95-second-long commentary-style report, stated that the LTTE is being used as a core propaganda tool by all political parties and independent groups in the General Elections "according to political observers". This is the first time that there was a critique of the way in which political parties (and the media) used the ethnic conflict as part of their overall mudslinging campaigning and political manoeuvring. However, the channel did not state who the "political observers" they were quoting were. In this report, there was a strong attack on the PA that was seen as "proclaiming itself as peacekeepers". There was also an implied critique of the PA's stance on the annihilation of the LTTE (as stated in their manifesto) as one of its primary means of solving the ethnic conflict.
- The same report by **Sooriyan FM** also commented cynically on the propaganda slogans of Tamil parties contesting in Colombo, the North-East and upcountry which consisted of the emergency, rights of the Tamils, insistence on Government-LTTE peace talks, recognizing the LTTE as the sole representative of the Tamils, pressing government for the cessation of the war, and inviting the Tigers to take part in mainstream politics. It also made references to other (Sinhala) ethnically-based parties who were proposing the annihilation of the LTTE to safeguard the unity of Sri Lanka. There was a general disillusionment with both minority and majority political parties in this news item.
- Forming a backdrop to this news item, a **Shree** news item of September 20th reported a challenge by the Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, made at a PA rally in Badulla, to the UNP to state their position on the LTTE. The Prime Minister also stated that he was not ready to arrive at a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE.
- On the 22nd of September, a report on **Isira** (Telshan group) reported a denial made by Ranil Wickramasinghe in response to PA allegations of LTTE suspects in the UNP list of contestants. His accusations against the PA having LTTE sympathizers in the national list came in the form of Shivagnaman Akileshwaran. He also requested the President to state her position on the LTTE.

6. Television News and the Release of the PA Manifesto

The release of the PA manifesto, *Our Vision*, by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake was one more opportunity for **TNL** to carry racist anti-PA

propaganda and threats to the unity of the nation. Both **TNL** English and Sinhala news talked about plans to abolish the Executive Presidency, formulate the new constitution, and decentralise state power, with the advice of the Maha Sangha. **TNL** quoted the manifesto on welfare measures, commenting on there being no indication of how the PA will fund these measures, analogous to the accusations being levelled at the UNP over its spending promises. It quoted Managala Samraweera's statement that the inclusion of Varatharaja Perumal as a National List nominee was a matter to be proud of, which was intended to have a negative impact on viewers about the PA. **TNL** also observed how Dinesh Gunewardena tried to rationalize his membership in the PA (his party, the MEP, has an anti-devolution stance), and how there were no SLMC members present at the release of the manifesto.

True to form, on the 27th of September, **TNL** English news telecast a JVP rally at which Tilvin Silva attacked the PA manifesto as a way of misleading the public about the threat to the unity of the nation, stating that the whole purpose of the PA's intention to form a national government was to get the constitution passed and to abolish the Executive Presidency and "turn the country" into a Federal State. **TNL** habitually uses the substantive information available through JVP rallies to attack the PA.

On the same day, on **TNL** Sinhala news, the dubious credentials of Shivagnanam Akileshwaran, a NUA National List nominee from the East, was reported with a still picture of the *Dalada Maaligawa* (Temple of the Tooth) in the background. The *Dalada Maaligawa* is the symbol of Buddhism in the country, and Akileshwaran is alleged to have been involved in an LTTE spy ring feeding information to the LTTE in Kandy prior to the bombing of the temple by the LTTE several years ago. The juxtaposition of this picture with the specific story had definite inflammatory purposes. While **MTV** had a similar news item on attempts by The Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) to invalidate NUA national list nominations, including that of Akhileshwaran, it was not presented in an inflammatory manner.

The **MTV** presentation of the release of the PA manifesto gave a clearer summary of the manifesto and concentrated on whether the PA was confident that it could get constitutional reforms passed in parliament. Mangala Samraweera was also quoted as saying that the draft bill would be the basis for future political dialogue. Ratnasiri Wickramayake's bid to destroy the LTTE militarily was downplayed by **MTV**.

7. Minority Parties in Different Language Media

The way in which minority parties were covered on the Tamil channels and Sinhala channels were markedly different. The Tamil radio channels **Swarna Oli**, **Shakthi FM** and **Sooriyan FM** covered more news items based on substantive issues such as dialogue with the LTTE, the disenfranchisement of plantation workers, civilian issues, day-to-day problems including voters in Tamil speaking areas receiving Sinhala-only circulars, the lack of enthusiasm among Jaffna civilians about the elections, the problem of voting in uncleared areas, and the Jaffna Human Rights Commission's appeals to postpone elections in the peninsula.

Sinhala and English radio news, much as on Sinhala and English television news, concentrated on party processes, the NUA leadership crisis, and the cancellation of the TULF nomination list in Digamadulla. The CWC issue with the promise of a Rs. 400 salary increase for plantation workers of course, got coverage in the Sinhala channels. In this way, Tamil radio channels showed relatively more diversity than the Tamil **Shakthi** Television channel from its sister channels.

Section 3

Survey of Discussion Programmes

This survey covers two private television stations, **Swarnawahini** and **TNL**, and one radio channel, **Isira**, which aired election-related discussion programs during the campaign period.

The main programs analysed are *Jana Handa* (**TNL**) and *Rathu Ira* (**Swarnawahini**), while *Deshapalana Sathiya* (**Swarnawahini**), *Ukusu Esa* (**TNL**), *Indrakeelaya* (**TNL**), *Pasuvadana* (**TNL**), *Live at 8* (**Swarnawahini**) and *Ilakkaya* (Isira Radio) are also described in this study.

Programme and Channel	Frequency and Number Aired During Survey Period	Rating and/or Viewer Popularity	Summary of Subject Areas Covered	Conclusions on Impartiality / Partisanship
<i>Jana Handa</i> (TNL)	15 programmes.	Lower viewer numbers than <i>Rathu Ira</i> .	Concentrates on political processes with a marginal discussion on issues of economic policy and war.	Partial towards UNP. Pro-war and anti-devolution. Anti-minorities. Under 20% non-party candidates.
<i>Rathu Ira</i> (Swarnawahini)	Bi-weekly. 8 programmes were surveyed.	Higher viewer numbers than <i>Jana Handa</i> .	Gives relatively more coverage than <i>JH</i> to economic and war issues. But generally on same lines.	Relatively more balanced politically. Pro-war
<i>Deshapaalana Sathiya</i> (Swarnawahini)	Weekly	Higher viewer numbers than both <i>RI</i> and <i>JH</i> .	Weekly news roundup.	Relatively more balanced politically.

Live at 8 (Swarnawahini)	Daily on weekdays only	NA	Informal news show with on-camera and phone interviews with contestants, and with commentators to a lesser extent.	Relatively more balanced politically.
Ukusu Esa (TNL)	Occasional	NA	Political commentary and interviews	Highly partisan in favour of UNP
Indrakeelaya (TNL)	Occasional	NA	Political commentary and interviews	Highly partisan in favour of UNP
Pasuwadana (TNL)	Occasional	NA	News roundup	Sensationalist.
Ilakkaya (TNL Radio)	Weekly	NA	Interviews with public on political issues.	Highly partisan in favour of UNP.

Viewer ratings for programmes are based on Survey Lanka data for September 26th and October 6th 2000.

Chart 2

Comparison of Discussion Programmes in terms of Key Issues

Programme / Issue	Political Party Perspective	Ethnic Conflict	Economic Policy	Rights Issues	Gender Issues
Jana Handa (TNL)	Pro-UNP	Pro-War. Encourages Majoritarianism. Anti-minorities.	UNP as more “economically efficient”. Sees economic solutions in party rather than policy terms.	Mentions rights issues but no priority given.	Mainly male participants. Women’s issues almost exclusively in terms of women in politics.
Rathu Ira (Swarnawahini)	Pro-UNP	Pro-War	More diverse range of economic policy options aired. No noticeable party line.	No Focus	All male participants. No focus on women’s issues.

Live at 8 (Swarnawahini)	Neutral	Substantial exposure to majority nationalism.	No Focus	Civic education on rights during elections.	No Focus
Deshapalana Sathiya (Swarnawahini)	Neutral	Neutral	No Focus	No Focus	No Focus
Ukusu Esa (TNL)	UNP Propaganda	Inciting hatred against Tamils.	No Focus	No Focus	No Focus
Indrakeelaya (TNL)	Pro-UNP	Inciting hatred against Tamils.	No Focus	No Focus	No Focus
Pasuvadana (TNL)	NA	No Focus	No Focus	No Focus	No Focus
Ilakkaya (Isira Radio)	Partisan towards UNP	Invokes racism	UNP as having more economically efficient policy.	Voter participation	No Focus

Chart 3

The most popular **TNL** discussion programme was *Jana Handa* (People's Voice), a live, interactive programme involving politicians and, to a lesser extent, civil society leaders. Screened phone-in interviews are entertained towards the middle of the programme. Other than that, *Ukusu Esa* (Hawk's Eye), an occasional programme on **TNL** offers views on ongoing political/social issues. For English programmes over **TNL**, there was only a *Cross Talk* programme on election violence that dealt with election-related material.

Swarnawahini provides two main discussion programmes, *Rathu Ira* (Red Line), broadcast twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays on the same format as *Jana Handa*, and *Live at Eight*, a one-hour "news-show" with occasional interviews broadcast every weekday at 8 p.m. **Swarnawahini** also broadcasts *Deshapalana Sathiya* (News Week), a compendium of the news fitted into a chatty news-show format lasting about one hour every week.

Sirasa, like **MTV** with its Tamil component **Shakthi TV** provided no comprehensive discussion/documentary programmes for the period.

A failure to use programmes other than news to deal with political issues was also reflected in the English and Tamil radio channels. Only **Isira**, **TNL**'s radio channel, broadcast two discussion programmes. One was *Ilakkaya* (Target), an interactive programme that entertained questions and opinions from listeners on subjects ranging from constitutional reform and election manifestos to election violence. The lack of discussion programmes was particularly conspicuous over Tamil radio which could have presented new angles on issues crucial to the campaigning process,

such as the ethnic conflict and the economy, that were virtually obscured in the Sinhala and English programming.

1. *Jana Handa*

All *Jana Handa* programmes telecast between Sept 13th and Oct 13th were monitored. Ten programmes telecast from the 25th of September to the 9th of October were tabulated for content (see appendix). One programme which was telecast on October 6th was not included in the content survey due to an error in recording. Viewership data from Survey Lanka Ltd., which records the viewing patterns of 600 households scattered throughout the country, indicates significantly lower viewership figures for *Jana Handa* than for *Rathu Ira*. For example, on October 6th 2000 *Jana Handa* was watched by only 1% of the 600 households, *Rathu Ira* was watched by 4%.

Jana Handa generally has a rather superficial level of discussion with politicians using the forum more as a political platform than for discussing substantive issues in the service of civic education. While widely known as a party siren for the UNP, *Jana Handa* seemed to overcome these affiliations when it came to the discussion of the ethnic conflict, a major component of all party manifestoes. Even UNP party members were not spared the rod when discussions took a turn towards a non-military solution to the ethnic conflict. Similarly, discussions on economic policy took on rather simplistic angles related to the differences in PA, UNP, JVP policy and so on with no substantive economic analysis. A large proportion of discussion time was spent on issues of process, mostly confined to mudslinging at the expense of dealing with policy statements and their implications.

The superficial nature of the discussion is due not merely to the lack of prior investigative research, but also to the composition of the guests. For the time period under discussion, 40 political party contestants or individuals with clear political affiliations made up 80% of the guest list. There were ten politically unaffiliated participants – two civil society activists, three journalists and five religious dignitaries – making up the remaining 20% of the guest list. However, all appeared in just three programmes related to election violence. No economists, social scientists, or academics were invited to offer views on substantive issues to compensate for the campaign-oriented stance of the election contestants.

Jana Handa made the most of PA election violence and ruling party's treatment of the Election Commissioner pertaining to the issue of stickers for polling cards, and used the party's performance in the run-up to the elections as a way of attacking it. 62% of the questions in the lop-sided question-and-answer sessions criticised the PA.

The diversity of political standpoints in party manifestos was not reflected in the programmes surveyed with minority parties getting very little exposure, except for former members of the NUA. The discussions were also predicated on the assumption that there were major differences between the PA and UNP policies, particularly pertaining to economic policy.

Time allocation for Political Parties & Other Groups – *Jana Handa*

PARTY	NO OF MINUTES
UNP	477
PA	346
MODERATOR	285
JVP	111
SU	64
LP	48
NLF	44
NUA	42
SBP	29
NON P/PARTY	27
PF	27
PP	24
NWP	22
NPP	19

Chart 4

The moderator also asked leading questions, and was highly opinionated on certain issues. He failed to check callers and participants when making unproved allegations, unlike the practice on Swarnawahini's *Rathu Ira*, in keeping with basic journalistic ethics. The number of questions allowed were on average 6.9 daily, rather low considering the extreme length of the programmes themselves. Moreover, the moderator took up as much as 18% of the time in all the discussion programmes tabulated, as opposed to only 7% taken up by the *Rathu Ira* moderator (see charts 3 and 4).

There were four absentees on four programmes for the period under survey, all of them PA contestants or party members:

1. Susil Premachandra, Western Provincial Council MP, absent on September 22nd and substituted by Somaweera Chandrasiri, Publicity Officer, and national list MP, PA.
2. Bandula Gunewardena, PA (MEP), absent on 25th September, and replaced by Jayatissa de Costa of the SLFP Disciplinary Committee and Law Commission. However, Bandula Gunewardena did attend the *Rathu Ira* programme of September 22nd.
3. Joseph Peiris, the then PA Deputy Minister for Fisheries, absent on September 20th.
4. Pavithra Vanniarachchi, PA, absent on the 4th of October for a "special" forum for women contestants. She also refused a phone interview.

1.1 The Ethnic Conflict⁴

The discussion of the ethnic conflict was limited and lacked the diversity actually present in the manifestos of various political parties. Viewers generally received the accepted positions of “a war for peace” and the refusal to deal with serious issues of political dialogue or the repercussions of protracted war (see Figs. 3.2 and 3.3). As much as 32% of the entire time spent on the ethnic conflict on those programmes tabulated for contents was spent invoking racism (see footnote 1 for definition of racism).

Only 1% of the time allocated for the ethnic conflict in the 10 programmes studied contained anti-war statements. 36% of the time was spent in favour of constitutional reform, and 48% against it.

The issue of Varatharaja Perumal, former Chief Minister of the North Eastern Province and former leader of the EPRLF, being on the PA's national list was put to inflammatory propaganda purposes in at least three of the programmes monitored. In the September 15th *Jana Handa*, three nearly-identical questions were levelled by the moderator at the day's PA representative Kesaralal Guneseckara on the issue of Varatharaja Perumal. Varatharaja Perumal came up in this particular programme at least five times. The issue reappeared on *Jana Handa* of September 26th which had Rajitha Senarathne (UNP) and Wimal Weerawansa (JVP) as guests and such discussions were clearly encouraged by the moderator.

Similarly, when J.M. Muzamil of the National Unity Alliance (NUA), attended *Jana Handa* of September 29th, one of the first questions levelled at him by the moderator concerned the NUA membership of Shivagnanam Akilleshwaran, an “LTTE suspect” and prisoner. With the concurrence of the moderator, the questions repeatedly raised in this context were personal rather than substantive. This issue was raised again on the 22nd of September and the 5th of October. On the latter instance, these allegations were put to clear propaganda use by the channel when they allowed the Leader of the Opposition Ranil Wickramasinghe to present inflammatory material such as posters that juxtaposed photos of the President with Akilleshwaran.

The moderator also capitalized on the issue of the correspondence of letters between President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge and the LTTE as a propaganda strategy. A biased, potentially aggressive comment was also made by the moderator to Wickramabahu Karunaratne (Sept 22nd) that he should be contesting Tamil areas instead of Colombo for his stand on the conflict (very understated in this programme), as well as the large proportion of Tamil contestants in his party. There were also repeated accusations against Karunaratne on his

⁴ A note on the tabulation of content for ethnic conflict:

- While many issues such as “pro-dialogue” and “anti-war” might overlap, the discussions were tabulated for the most immediate gist of the content;
- Time allocated for invoking racism was defined as any period of time devoted to attacking parties or individuals in a way that inflamed racialist sentiment, including attacking parties for including individuals from minority groups alleged to hold alternative viewpoints on political reform; and
- While time allocations tabulated under “invoking racism” does not necessarily reflect station bias, the manner in which the moderator encouraged such inflammatory comments at the expense of substantive debate was clear.

travels to Canada for an “Ealam Conference”, in reality a multi-party conference in which the LTTE too participated. Interestingly, Jayalath Jayawardena, the UNP contestant present on the same panel, who also attended the conference, was not attacked so aggressively on this count.

Overall, the programme demonstrated clear hostility towards certain political stands, particularly the PA, and certain participants. The more populist stands also served as propaganda for the Opposition party, undermining the role of the media as an impartial disseminator of information and debate during an election campaign.

1.2 Economic Policy

The approach to the standpoints put down in party manifestoes on economic policy, as well as the assessment of the two main ruling parties’ economic performance was weak and did not present the diversity of views on the subject. Again, the assumptions often rested on issues of PA inefficiency in economic management, and UNP efficiency and resulting benefits to the stock market, and similar issues (see Fig. 3.4).

No assessment was made of the similarities between UNP and PA economic policy. That their economic policies were different only in degree rather than content was rarely discussed: both parties support free-market economic policies, with a focus on business investor interests and both parties promote the privatisation of public resources. And both parties have tried to do away with welfare and price subsidies.

14% of the economy-related contents of the 10 programmes tabulated for content from September 25th – October 9th supported open-economic policy, while only 10% of the time was spent in support of a more regulated economic policy. “Economic issues” largely revolved around constant attacks against the government about not giving a promised Rs. 2500 grant to Janasaviya (a project of the former UNP government) recipients, and Rs.1500 to the unemployed.

The moderator’s failure to take on economic issues in a constructive manner was seen in his uncritical acceptance of evasive answers to economy-related questions about the UNP representing the capitalist class. A good example of this was when the moderator asked Dr. Rajitha Senaratne of the UNP about this issue. The answer, that the party clearly did not represent the capitalist class since Samurdhi recipients will get a Rs. 1000 monthly grant, public servants will receive a Rs. 2000 salary increase, and as there will be grants to pensioners on their election to power, was not cross-questioned by the moderator.

The moderator also failed to go into detail about issues relevant to voters such as the Opposition Leader’s contradictory promises to the people and businesspeople in Partnership 2000, a round of discussions held with the business sector said to have revolved around demands for longer working hours, the removal of restrictions on hiring and firing employees, a host of financial concessions to boost capitalist investment and profit, and moves to abolish the Wage Board system. No time was allocated for the discussion of the implication of dialogue with business people undertaken by both parties in September 2000.

1.3 Rights Issues

Issues to do with the Equal Opportunity Bill and the Worker's Charter, both now defunct proposals, were evasively handled by the moderator. A statement made by S.L. Gunsekara of the Sihala Urumaya that the Equal Opportunities Bill was an attempt at the reinvocation of dead issues was not pursued. Similarly, a statement made by the business affiliate and Citizen's Front member Patrick Fernando that the Worker's Charter was a politically-motivated document was not examined. Education policy reform, another vexed issue in Sri Lankan politics, was again evasively handled even though the issue were brought up, for example by the JVP participant Wimal Weerawansa (September 26th). Again, issues fundamental to voters were evaded in this manner.

1.4 Party-Based Politics

44% of the programmes tabulated for content was reserved for party and parliamentary politics (see Figs. 3.1 and 3.5) and a large proportion of this was accusatory in nature, and in the service of party campaigning.

1.5 Women's Issues

Women's issues were nominally discussed in one programme reserved for "women contestants" on the 6th of October four days prior to the elections. 40% of the time was spent on procedural issues and on the issue of why women can't enter politics (see Fig. 3.6). The lack of interest in pursuing the diversity of women's rights issues as pertaining to political platforms was clear in the way in which the moderator more or less repeated the same question on empowering women in politics.

Renuka Herath mentioned, as if it were a party achievement, the fact that it was during the UNP regime that the Women's Bureau and the Women's Ministry in 1982 were established. That these were trends all over the world with the proclamation of the women's decade from 1975-1985 was brought up neither by the moderator nor the participants. Many personal attacks on the maltreatment of Susanthika Jayasinghe (Olympic Bronze Medal winner 2000) by members of the ruling party were used as an argument for the PA's lack of success in implementing women's rights.

Nimalka Fernando, a contestant from the New Left Front, observed the backward trends of the PA Manifesto from 1994 to 2000 on women's issues. Where the 1994 PA manifesto had been specific on women's issues such as on migrant women, malnutrition, and legalizing the women's manifesto, she pointed out that the 2000 manifesto was a watered down version of this which used women's rights in the service of the election platform. Again, the importance of having non-contestants in the panel were evident in the way in which the real, controversial issues were downplayed by all contestants, such as the criminalization of abortion, or the lack of legislation on domestic violence in the Sri Lankan legal framework.

2. Rathu Ira

Eight *Rathu Ira* Programmes were closely monitored for the period September 13th to October 9th. Five of the programmes telecast from September 25th to October 9th were also tabulated for contents (see Fig. 3.7). *Rathu Ira* is held bi-weekly on Tuesdays and Fridays and is based more or less on the same format as *Jana Handa* with phone-in question sessions with viewers. During the period surveyed, *Rathu Ira* was relatively more balanced, entertained more diverse viewpoints and dealt relatively more with substantive issues than did *Jana Handa*. However, accusatory politics and party campaigning still reigned unchecked.

Discussions with Ranil Wickramasinghe and President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunga took a different turn from the discussion with Ranil Wickramasinghe on *Jana Handa*, with more concentration on substantive issues. However, the investigative quality was poor and the programme again failed to educate voters on the implications of election manifestos.

Rathu Ira entertained more questions from viewers, averaging about 10.5 in a programme on average around two hours long, whereas *Jana Handa* averaged only 6.9 questions per programme even though the programmes themselves were longer. Callers were allowed to stay on the line to respond back if necessary, providing a more interactive format. The moderator, Chandana Suriyabandara, was relatively balanced compared to *Jana Handa* but still tended to impose his opinion on the participants. *Rathu Ira* abided more by journalistic ethics in not entertaining negative comments about candidates or others not available to defend themselves and on several occasions callers were cut short when bringing forward unproved allegations about individuals who were not involved in the discussion programme.

The most diversity of opinion was in the phone-in questions. A wider range of issues in relation to the ethnic conflict and party manifestos were discussed than on *Jana Handa*, with 18 questions, or 21%, being devoted to economic policy. There were a range of opinions on the ethnic issue, with Tamil speakers and more women participating, perhaps because they were passed by the screeners, or perhaps because the callers themselves felt that *Rathu Ira* was more accessible to them than more partisan programmes, including *Jana Handa*.

Time Allocation for Political Parties and other Groups – Rathu Ira

PARTY	NO OF MINTUES
PA	277
UNP	258
JVP	135
SU	70
MODERATOR	68
NLF	38
NPP	30

Chart 5

However, the guests were even less diverse than on *Jana Handa*. 100% of the guests for the period under survey were political party contestants with 64.7% of

them belonging either to the PA or the UNP. Again, no economists, social scientists and academics had been invited. The panels were also predominantly male in composition. This explains why, in spite of being a forum for diverse opinions from callers, and the relative impartiality of the moderator, the more popular tacks were no different from those on *Jana Handa* (see Chart 1).

Absentees

The only absentee in the seven programmes surveyed for content was Kingsley T. Wickramaratne, the then Minister of Trade, who was absent on September 26th.

2.1 Ethnic Conflict

Rathu Ira showed little difference from *Jana Handa* in its approach to the ethnic conflict (see Figs. 3.8 and 3.9). Like *Jana Handa*, *Rathu Ira* spent only 1% of the entire time allocated to the ethnic conflict on anti-war sentiments. It spent 28% of the time on pro-war discourse, more than on *Jana Handa*. Less time than on *Jana Handa* was spent on pro-dialogue discourse (21%). However, less time was spent invoking racism (9%) because of the relatively less inflammatory nature of the programme. Despite these differences between *Jana Handa* and *Rathu Ira*, there was very little difference in terms of the basic stance on the ethnic conflict between the two programmes.

Again, there was a tendency for racist slurs to go unchecked, and the moderator also asked forceful leading questions of Ranil Wickramasinghe on political dialogue, such as, “So that means that you hope to talk with the LTTE ... we have experience talking with them don’t we?” The moderator also got the PA’s Bandula Gunewardena to state that he was against a Federal State, much in the coercive manner of the *Jana Handa* moderator.

The phone-in questions over *Rathu Ira* reflected more diverse viewpoints on the ethnic issues than did *Jana Handa*.

2.2 Economic Policy

Rathu Ira gave more exposure to diverse economic viewpoints than *Jana Handa* (see Fig. 3.10). 22% of the time allocated for the discussion of economic issues was spent in support of regulated economic policy, 3% of this in favour of indigenous production. Only 6% of the time was allocated for pro-free-market statements as compared to 14% on *Jana Handa*. There was a clear diversity of opinion on economic issues which included discussions of indigenous production, culture and globalisation.

The discussion of economic policy saw significant space given to hurling accusations of broken promises and lauding the UNP’s efficient economic management. Lengthy invocation of statistics by guests often went unchecked by the moderator. Comments that could have been easily cross-examined were uncritically accepted by the

moderator, such as when Ranil Wickramasinghe on October 6th said that there is no connection between the war and economic decline.

The moderator was sometimes unable to substantiate his questions, as when he failed to give reliable sources to allegations he made against the government that foreign investors were leaving the country (interview with President Kumaratunge, Oct 7th). Similarly, on the issue of the planned revocation of free education after the age of 14, he was unable to critically respond to the President's vague statement that this measure will be taken only as a means of taking free education to rural areas. Again, as over *Rathu Ira*, valuable opportunities to discuss education policy were missed in this way.

2.3 Party-Based Politics

44.43% of the seven programmes surveyed consisted of party and parliamentary issues, more or less the same proportion as for *Jana Handa*. Even though there were fewer verbal assaults on this programme than on *Jana Handa*, the substantive issues were more or less on the same lines. This high concentration on issues of political procedure (see Fig. 3.11) is an indication of the way in which both programmes preferred to stay within accepted lines of criticism.

3. Live at 8

Live at 8 is held every weekday on **Swarnawahini** from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. It takes on a news show format combining interviews with politicians, experts, and the public. It is hosted alternately by Susara Dinal, Manusha Nanyakkara, Claude Gurukuwula and Palitha Perera. The advantage of such a format is its ability to explore issues at greater depth, as well as give participants more airtime to express their views. An interesting feature of *Live at 8* during the survey period was that it allocated more time for the Sihala Urumaya (62 minutes) than for the UNP (57 minutes). It spent 180 minutes on the PA. It is to be noted, however, that the UNP and JVP manifestoes were discussed on the programme prior to the survey period.

Time Allocation for Political Parties and other Groups – *Live at 8*

PARTY	NO OF MINUTES
PA	180
SU	62
UNP	57
PP	49
NUA	33
MODERATOR	32
LP	18
POLICE OFFICIALS	16
GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS	11
NLF	10
SBP	10
NDF	09

JVP	6
USMS	6
PAFFREL	2
RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIVES	1
JOURNALISTS	1

This is the daily news component of the **Swarnawahini** channel and generally covers the same news items as other television channels. As much as 90% of the interviewees represented political parties or party political interests, reflecting the paucity of non-party-political views in the media during the lead-up to the elections.

A special feature however, was the introduction of party manifestos in an interactive manner with party representatives being questioned about their manifestos.

The Sihala Urumaya got more exposure than any other party on the sessions reserved to discuss manifestos. The attitude towards the party in the programme overall was also reflected in the fact that they received the second highest amount of coverage in all interview formats within the programme.

The PA press conference announcing its manifesto was briefly telecast over *Live at 8* on September 21st, the day of its release. All the comments telecast over the programme dealt with processes rather than with the substantive issues in the manifesto. The issue of the Election Commissioner and the PA's stand on it was also publicised.

The New Left Front (NLF) was represented by Wickramabahu Karunaratne on September 26th. Here, Karunaratne took a much more definite stand on the ethnic issue than in the *Jana Handa* programme on which he appeared on September 22nd.

Others appearing as guests during the period were Rajiva Wijesingha of the Liberal Party, Dr. Shantha Lokubandara of the National Development Party (NDP) and Harischandra Wijetunge of the Mahasammatha Bhumiputra Pakshaya, a Sinhala nationalist party.

4. *Deshapalana Sathiya*

Deshapalana Sathiya (News Week) is a weekly programme on **Swarnawahini** television taking on an informal, chatty form much akin to a living room conversation. It rounds up the week's issues in detailed descriptions of informal as well as formal events. Three programmes broadcast on September 22nd, 29th and October 6th were surveyed for the report. A special feature of the programme was its "checking in" on District correspondents to ascertain the political climate in the areas with a special focus on election violence. It dealt with issues such as the Election Commissioner's "unauthorized" issuing of stickers on polling cards, citizen activism for free and fair elections, an informative discussion about a group of lawyers willing to appear free of charge for complainants with cases of election malpractices, and on the Ranil/PA-LTTE connections. Religious leaders also appealed for free and fair elections over *Deshapaalana Sathiya* on October 6th. No noticeable bias was detected in the programmes.

5. Ukusu Esa

Ukusu Esa (Eagle Eye) is an occasional programme telecast over **TNL** with a clear campaign-oriented propaganda tack in favour of the UNP, and with a far higher level of propaganda than other programmes on the same channel. It is conducted by Srilal Priyantha, who in late September 2000 was abducted and later released by the Criminal Investigation Department of the government.

On September 20th, *Ukusu Esa* dealt with malpractices at the Ports Authority, with guest Mahilal Silva, a trade Union leader active for the past 10 years and now representing the National Workers' Association (*Jaathika Seevaka Sangamaya*) and the Sri Lanka Workers' Association, clearly co-opted for party political purposes. Before going on to the guest however, Srilal Priyantha engaged in an extended and disproportionate monologue on the malpractices and illegal activities of Babus, a Manager of the Ports Authority, with clear PA links, who **TNL** had somehow got to know is a heart patient. The programme also held forth about Babus' forged educational certificates.

The programme discussed, however, the way in which the government had flouted caretaker laws and recruited personnel to the Ports with a clear intention of using them for campaign activity in the East. There was also an accusation that resources were being taken from Colombo to Oluvil for campaigning purposes.

Ukusu Esa of October 6th, repeated on October 8th, was a "retaliatory" programme intended to level the playing field after the allegations made against the Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe over connections with the LTTE. It attacked PA lawyer Sripathi Suuriarachchi on a statement made that the LTTE supported the UNP campaign. Rather illogical assertions were made by Sri Lal Priyantha that as the Intelligence Unit of the CID did not know about this, it couldn't be true. Then the programme went on, with a degree of investigative zeal that was unfortunately missing in **TNL** discussions relating to policy issues, to discuss proof of PA-LTTE connections. The moderator also pointed out that Sripathi Suriarachchi was an officer who was involved in large scale offences in the Navy. The precise nature of these offences was not, however, elaborated, leaving it up to the viewer to imagine what they were.

Mention was made here of Shivagnanam Akhileshvaran, as in the discussion programmes *Jana Handa* and *Rathu Ira*, and his connections in the bombing in the Buddhist temple the Dalada Maaligawa, an inflammatory issue in a largely Buddhist society. Several other documents are brought forward to show PA correspondences with the LTTE. Mention was also made of Sathashivam and secret police connections with this "LTTE suspect". Photographs of Sathashivam with various members of the PA were also shown.

6. Indrakeelaya

Indrakeelaya (Lightening) is an occasional programme dealing with public opinion on various issues. It takes on a highly partisan, campaign-oriented tack in favour of the UNP and is extremely inflammatory on race issues.

Indrakeelaya of September 14th had clear racial overtones in the way in which it used the issue of Varatharaja Perumal on the national list to hit out at the PA. The interviewees made it clear that the whole of Tamil society was conflated to “the enemy” with statements such as “they [*ung* – a derogatory Sinhala word] will eat away at our whole country if we allow this”, or “we have to get *them* out, or else we will have to give *them* half the country”. The questions were clearly designed to discredit the PA. An example is the following question: “Isn’t it to get political privileges that Tamil people like Varatharaja who raised the Ealam flag are getting into the [PA] national list?”

Indrakeelaya of September 21st, dealt with the issue of the Election Commissioner and the sticker issue, with most of the interviewees condemning the PA for its actions against the Commissioner. It was a perfect chance for **TNL** to lash out at PA election malpractices and the interviewer asked leading questions regarding the attempt by the PA to win the elections illegally by trying to disrupt anti-rigging measures.

Indrakeelaya of September 24th looked at the high expenditure of the President publicised in a UNP press conference immediately prior to the programme. It looked at the issue as if there were no other major factors stalling development in the country. The PA defence budget, for example, was never scrutinized in this manner.

7. Pasuvadana

Pasuvadana (After Word), an occasional programme telecast over **TNL**, on September 18th dealt with the Yellow Ribbon campaign, an unsuccessful CWC strike, the Election Commissioner’s sticker issue and the Sinhala Urumaya Manifesto.

Again, the programme was used for propaganda purposes as when criticism of the PA by the leader of the Opposition was highlighted. The steering away from substantive issues was again clear in the way in which a piece on Ajith Kumara’s defection from the JVP was personalized, showing family members verbally assaulting him for his defection with rather personal details. The bomb blast at Union place, which occurred during the election campaign, was shown in a sensationalist manner with an overdose of footage on broken heads and body parts. Overall, the programme lacked cohesion.

8. Ilakkaya

Ilakkaya (goal) was the only non-state radio discussion programme other than a re-broadcast of the previous day’s *Jana Handa* that was aired on the Telshan Network’s **Isira** radio. Much on the lines of **TNL** television’s *Indrakeelaya*, it sought public opinion on issues, again in a clearly campaign-oriented manner in favour of the UNP.

An *Ilakkaya* programme on the 29th of September utilized Susanthika Jayasingha’s victory at the Olympic games, along with her alleged harassment by a PA Minister, to criticise the PA. Programmes on the 24th and 28th of September looked at election

violence with the latter focussing on violence against the JVP. Another *Ilakkaya* programme on October 2nd looked at the way in which a free and fair election could be ensured through voter participation.

An *Ilakkaya* programme on October 4th asked listeners to give their opinion about their ideal political candidate in the face of mounting election violence. Out of 12 callers, five were against the PA and five were in favour of the UNP. An *Ilakkaya* programme on October 9th, the eve of the elections, focused on President Kumaratunga's plans to get a new constitution passed in parliament. Seven of the ten callers in the programme attacked the PA.

Conclusion

Overall, discussion programmes over the Telshan Network were used for propaganda purposes in favour of the UNP, with moderators clearly taking partial stands on issues as well as posing leading questions. Political bias was less prominent over **Swarnawahini**, the other channel that broadcast discussion programmes.

On both the Telshan channels and **Swarnawahini**, however, all discussion programmes also stayed within the framework of "accepted", pre-established, political debates in all areas under discussion. Issues of election violence, bribery, corruption and other malpractices, and dominant positions on the ethnic conflict were thus uppermost in most discussion programmes. Little effort was made to make viewers revisit dominant viewpoints or to educate voters on rarely-discussed issues such as political and legal reform, the implications of party manifestos on such reforms, or political dialogue in relation to the ethnic conflict. This criticism applies both to the blatantly propagandist media and the so-called "neutral" media.

Section 4

General Conclusion

Overall, the private media demonstrated a high degree of political bias in relation to election reporting, although some channels and programmes were far more biased than others. In addition, the private media spent little time or effort educating voters either about the practicalities of voting or about the key policy differences between the contending parties and candidates. They thus failed in their obligation to assist voters to make informed choices during the elections. As such, the private media failed to provide an adequate alternative to the state-controlled public media as a civic education tool during the Parliamentary Election campaign of October 2000.

Specific problems were as follows:

- The Telshan network (TNL) was expressly used for UNP party propaganda, as well as for inflammatory racist propaganda.
- The MBC, EAP and ABC networks, although more balanced than Telshan, concentrated heavily on the more prominent parties, thereby excluding valuable alternative proposals brought forward by less prominent political parties.
- There was little focus on substantive issues of a political, economic, social or other policy nature during the campaign. Instead, on some channels, such as those in the Telshan network and, to a lesser extent, those of the EAP network, personal attacks and party propaganda dominated.
- There was a clear majoritarian ethnic bias, particularly on the Telshan and EAP network channels. This bias was less apparent on the MBC (MTV) and ABC networks, perhaps because of the lack of discussion programming on these networks.
- Few commentators invited to speak over the non-state media were neutral, with the vast majority representing party political interests, and there was minimal civil society representation on all channels. This meant that a potentially vast area of political debate was viewed exclusively from the perspective of party politics, and particularly within the context of the PA-UNP competition.
- Contrary to the Election Commissioner's Guidelines, the non-state media used the election campaign period to maximise profit rather than to provide political parties with free or low-cost and non-discriminatory access. This meant that those parties with little commercial backing had little access to the media and thus inadequate publicity while some parties which garnered little public support actually received inordinate exposure.
- Also contrary to the Election Commissioner's Guidelines, **TNL** Television and **Isira** radio blatantly flouted the no-campaign rule during the 48 hours immediately preceding the polling.
- Overall, radio, which is usually popular with outreach programmes and possessing the capacity to engage communities around the island, carried very little election material during the campaign period. Only one discussion programme, Isira radio's *Ilakkaya*, had any regular interaction with listeners, and this had a clear UNP bias. The non-state media overall carried very little explicit voter education material, despite the need for this in certain communities.

Section 5

Recommendations

Mandatory

- All broadcast media should report election news fairly and objectively and facts should be clearly distinguished from commentary. Broadcast channels should not exhibit party political biases and should never actually campaign for political parties.
- The broadcast media should ensure that all political parties are granted access to their programmes on a non-discriminatory basis.
- Politicians, and others unfairly portrayed in the non-state media, whatever their political affiliations, should have a reasonable opportunity to respond.
- Media channels should strictly adhere to the Election Commissioner's Guidelines, including those relating to no-campaign periods and charging for political advertisements, and should be held accountable when flouting such regulations.

Voluntary

All non-state media should, on a voluntary basis:

- strive to be strictly non-partisan during election campaigns, regardless of who funds them;
- strive to establish a greater diversity of news sources than merely those of government and opposition press releases, and to include a greater number of representatives of non-governmental organisations, regional groups and minority groups as news sources during election campaigns;
- be sensitive to race, gender and class issues and, rather than inflaming racial sentiments, seek to promote tolerance and understanding;
- set clear, non-discriminatory advertising policies during election campaign periods and, where such advertising would result in inequitable access for parties, consider prohibiting paid political advertising (this is, for example, a recommendation of the media monitoring project in Zimbabwe);
- seek to ensure that discussions deal with substantive policy issues and prevent participants from resorting to allegations and counter-allegations; and
- carry more voter education material.