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The Changing Media Environment And Its Impact
On Media Values In Asia : A Sri Lankan Perspective

By

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"The Changing Media Environment and its impact on media values in Asia: A Sri Lankan perspective"

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Introduction

The media environment in Sri Lanka is experiencing change owing to pressure of various kinds and from a variety of forms of organisation, some internal, others external. While the internal factors are largely socio-political, the external factors are influenced by advances in modern technology, especially in respect of the electronic media. Also, in the wake of increasing economic liberalisation, private sector participation in radio and television broadcasting is a new phenomenon.

Another dimension of the changing media environment in Sri Lanka is that it has certain common features with the changes taking place in the media environment in other parts of Asia, and in particular in the South Asian region. Significantly, changes in the media environment have to a large extent been the outcome of information diffusion and ideological interaction facilitated by the media itself.

Ironically, the information explosion that has taken place in South Asia has occurred despite the generally low levels of literacy of its people. It is estimated that of the 1,100 million people in South Asia nearly 375 million adults are illiterate, that 125 million children of school-going age are not in primary or secondary school and that the large majority of those who have been to school have had only three to four years of elementary education. In respect of the literacy rate, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are exceptional in South Asia. In the former it is 87% and the school dropout rate is below 4%, while the pupil/teacher ratio for all schools is an average of 22, compared with, for instance 28.4 in 1972. However, there are regional disparities in respect of this data as well as in educational infrastructure provision.

Newspapers

Another relevant fact of the South Asian media environment is that while about 74 per cent of the population live in rural areas, the newspaper industry is metropolitan-based and has an urban bias. In Sri Lanka although the newspaper enterprise is about 165 years old and newspapers are published in the three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English, there are very few local level newspapers. Besides, since 1973 the largest single publisher of dailies, weeklies and other journals is a State-run organisation, which until the introduction of the 1973 legislation was a private undertaking. However, the number of newspapers and publishers especially in Sinhala, has increased and the total circulation too of newspapers has shown a steady rise over the past decade despite increases in the price of newspapers. The average
price of a daily newspaper is the equivalent of the price of two pound loaves of bread and a cup of tea or three-quarter of the price of a plate of rice and curry in an eating-house.

The circulation of copies per thousand persons per day of daily newspapers has risen from 16 in 1983 to 27 in 1993, while that of weekly newspapers has risen from 84 to 138 during the same period. Expressed differently, the circulation of newspapers per thousand persons per day has risen from 100 in 1983 to 165 in 1993. Published data are not available thereafter.

"Alternative Press"

A feature of the newspaper enterprise during the past five years is the emergence of what has been called the "alternative Press" - non-mainstream tabloid newspapers and journals in Sinhala whose main focus is domestic politics. It belongs to the genre of investigative journalism with its focus on the exposure of corruption in various spheres of governance and of waste, inefficiency and political preferment.

Besides relative illiteracy, poverty also impinges adversely on the information process in general, and in particular on the newspaper industry. In Sri Lanka, as in several other countries of the South Asian region, poverty affects between 30 to 40% of the population. Consequently, the newspaper although recognised as a medium of mass communication lacks a mass character in that its reach to a sizeable segment of the population is constrained by the twin factors of illiteracy and poverty. In Sri Lanka, however, illiteracy is a lesser constraint.

Radio

In contrast with newspapers and more so with television, radio in Sri Lanka is regarded as the medium of the poor, chiefly because of the low cost of a radio receiver, its minimal sophistication, portability and facility of maintenance. According to official figures radio broadcasting now covers at least 85% of the geographical area and its household penetration is reportedly 100%.

In 1991, Sri Lanka with a population of 17 million had an estimated total of 1,600,000 licensed radio receivers and 1,500,000 unlicensed receivers, making a total of 3,100,000 or 185 receivers per thousand of population. The figures represent a considerable improvement over the situation say 20 years earlier.
when the number of receivers was only 479,638 and the number of rediffusion relay sets was 22,000.

People who do not own a radio often listen to broadcasts in other peoples' homes, workplaces, community and recreation centres or in eating-houses and in the marketplace.

Until a couple of years ago since its introduction in 1925, radio was a state monopoly (Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation). Now there are four private radio stations, which initially were licensed to broadcast only music but were later allowed to include news, too, in their programmes. An unsatisfactory feature of the licensing scheme is that the Minister, who is the licensing authority, can cancel the licence without cause.

Of all stations' broadcasts, three are in Sinhala, two in Tamil and four in English. State radio has four regional stations which are community-oriented and are popular with rural audiences largely because their programmes are socially relevant and responsive to their needs, especially of disadvantaged groups.

While there is only one non-commercial national channel each in Sinhala, Tamil and English, there are four national commercial channels in Sinhala, two in Tamil and five in English. Consequently, radio now has an increasing advertising share which also enables advertisers to reach those areas of the rural market which TV has not penetrated yet. The SLBC and private radio stations are competing among themselves for commercials, besides competing with television stations for a share of advertising revenue.

In such a situation research and radio programming need to cooperate closely to ascertain listener preferences because radio audiences are heterogenous besides also being TV viewers. Public service broadcasting in particular has to measure up to listener expectations of it as a provider of socially useful information, reliable news without being politically partisan and as a medium of non-formal education. The challenge is to respond to these expectations while remaining commercially viable.

Programming and Advertising Codes

Besides the regulatory framework of broadcasting based on the general law, all radio stations are required to abide by a Programming Code and an Advertising Code. The latter prohibits the advertising of liquor and tobacco, comparative advertising, use of superlatives and resort to absolute, special or misleading
The Programming Code is broadly comparable with the General Standards for Broadcast Programming outlined in the Guidelines for Transnational Satellite Broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific Region as endorsed by the ABU in March 1995.

Among the ABU guidelines to be followed are:

* Need for sensitivity to the diversity of religio-cultural and social values
* Respect for religious beliefs and practices
* Avoidance of programming that could be derogatory or embarrassing to particular ethnic groups, or which could lead to exacerbation of ethnic tensions or conflict
* Need for good taste, restraint and decency in dealing with matters of sex
* Depiction of crime and violence should preclude condonation.
* News coverage should be accurate, fair and balanced.

Sri Lanka’s Television Programme Code drawn up in September 1986, while being country-specific incorporates the substance of the ABU Guidelines. Its code of General Principles sets out four points.

a. A high degree of commonsense and ordinary good taste in general;
b. Respect for law and order, communal harmony, religious, cultural and social values, parental and adult authority, good morals and clean living;
c. Consideration for individual opinions of the public; and
d. Special regard for the needs of children and youth.

There is still no published data of analysis of the type of programme put out by the private radio stations. But it is valid to conclude that the bulk of the programming is music. In this respect the programme type is similar to that of the State radio which devotes nearly 59% of its broadcast hours per month to entertainment. The SLBC also devotes 26% to religio-cultural content, 8% to news and 4% to education programmes.

According to a Bates Media Survey done recently, the radio listener profile shows that 42% of males over 15 and 48% of females over 15 listen to radio. In terms of income groups 47% of the upper, 50% of the middle and 38% of the lower income groups comprise the listener profile.
Serious lacuna

A serious lacuna of both radio and television broadcasting in Sri Lanka is the absence of a Media Council which could serve as an electronic media monitor and as a forum to inquire into complaints from the public.

A seminar on "Radio Broadcasting in Sri Lanka: Some Critical issues", held in October 1993 under the joint auspices of the SLBC, the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung reached several significant conclusions.

One important conclusion was that radio must ensure that the medium is used as a vehicle of free expression with a due sense of social responsibility and openness to opposite points of view. While the State radio could be legitimately used by the Government for diffusion of information of public interest and as a channel of public communication between the different structures of governance and the people, the Government must desist from using the State radio for politically partisan purposes or to serve its political propagandist ends.

The seminar was of the view that a coherently articulated media policy which would be part of a national policy on information consistent with the constitutional guarantee on freedom of speech, expression, publication and information, is essential.

The Peoples’ Alliance Government which came to power in August 1994, has since articulated a Media Policy, to which reference is made later in this paper.

Television

Television is the newest of the mass media in Sri Lanka, having been introduced in 1981. Its advent has affected the popularity of radio and cinema, besides its other socio-cultural consequences.

According to the Bates Media Survey, the television audience of 70% of all people consists of 35% who own TV sets and 35% who watch outside the home. Audiences continue to grow.
There are four terrestrial TV stations, two of which are State-owned (SLRC and ITN), with the former having all-island coverage and the latter 96% coverage. Two private stations (TNL and MTV) have 63% and 56% coverage respectively. In 1994 two satellite channels were introduced - BBC World Service by ETV1 and Star Plus and Prime Sports by ETV2. Each has 27% coverage. ETV’s action in making the viewing of the two satellite transmissions over the country’s air waves possible to local viewers has raised the issue of piracy and whether it is a violation of the Copyright law. The owners of ETV, the local station East West Ltd, contest such a view and argue that it is performing a service in the public interest.

While satellite TV transmission is for 24 hours, terrestrial transmission is only for 7 hours. The focus is on entertainment as is evidenced by the top ten programmes. The first five ratings are Sinhala tele-drama. News in Sinhala ranks sixth, while a weekly Sinhala comedy ranks eighth.

Reference has already been made to the TV Programme and Advertising Codes. It is a curious anomaly that while advertising of liquor and tobacco is prohibited on both radio and TV, there is no such prohibition in respect of newspapers. In newspaper advertising alcoholic beverages ranked second and cigarettes fourth of the top ten product categories in 1993.

Media ownership

During the past three years there has been a significant change in the pattern of the country’s media ownership. While the Government owns the largest radio station, which also has the largest reach, it also owns two TV stations. Additionally, the largest single publisher of newspapers is the State-run Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd.

There are five newspaper companies of which one, East West Ltd also runs a satellite TV station. Two private companies, Maharaja Group and Teleshan Ltd. have each one TV station and one radio station. Another company, Colombo Communications Ltd has only one radio station.

Government’s Media Policy

The direct and indirect restrictions imposed on the media by the previous Government and the overt and covert pressures on journalists including 32 recorded instances of attacks on or intimidation of journalists...
during 1991 and 1992 resulted in the creation of countervailing forces and organisations, chief of which was the Free Media Movement. Media Freedom was also one of the key issues which dominated the general election campaign. The Peoples' Alliance in its election manifesto promised media freedom as an integral component of its policy towards the renewal of democracy in Sri Lanka.

In pursuance of its election pledge, the Minister in charge of Media articulated on behalf of the Government its Media Policy, which the Cabinet approved in October 1994.

According to that policy, "media democracy can best be ensured by:

1. Freeing the existing media from government/political control
2. Creating new institutions aimed at guaranteeing media freedom as well as raising the quality and standards of free media, both print and electronic.
3. Promoting a new democratic media culture through new practices."

Among the other points emphasised in the policy declaration are:

i. Government recognition of the media's right to expose corruption and misuse of power.
ii. Government cooperation to media and journalists' associations to work towards formulating a charter that will set acceptable parameters of news programmes in all electronic media.
iii. Government assurance that it will not use State-owned media for partisan political propaganda.
iv. Rescinding or amending laws that affect freedom of expression, information and publication.
v. Appointment of a new Press Council or an alternative body consonant with media freedom and in consultation with journalists' organisations and civil rights activists.
vi. Broadbasing the ownership of ANCL in accordance with the original legislation.
vii. Setting up of a National Media Institute to cater to the professional needs of journalists.
viii. Government advertising to be distributed among all media organisations without preferment.
ix. New salary scheme and pensions for journalists.
In accordance with this policy the Minister for Media has appointed four committees to report on:

1. Media law reform
2. Broadbasing ANCL
3. Salaries and pensions of journalists
4. National Media Institute

The committees have made progress in their work. One has submitted its report and another has submitted an interim report. A regrettable feature is that very few organisations of journalists have submitted memoranda or have chosen to give evidence before the committees. This attitude is similar to the reactive attitude of many journalists to the information process. Very few of them are proactive in their approach to journalism.

Notwithstanding the absence of journalists interacting with the committee on Media Law Reform the Committee in its interim report has recommended repeal of the Official Secrets Act and the adoption of a Freedom of Information Act; amendment of several provisions of the Penal Code insofar as they impinge on freedom of speech and expression; repeal of the amendments to the Parliament (Powers and Privileges) Act; enactment of a Contempt of Court Act that sets out clearly the scope of contempt of court and the sub-judice rule; the need for constitutional guarantees on freedom of expression to be brought into line with international legal obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Among the other issues to be addressed are-

i. replacement of the Press Council Law by a Media Council Act
ii. a statutory right of reply
iii. greater freedom for the electronic media

Response of the media community

A new sense of freedom of expression was evident in the media shortly after the Government took office. But gradually a credibility gap emerged between pledge and performance, especially on the principles of transparency and accountability, which the Government had said would characterise its governance.
When sections of the press began to be critical of the Government and of the actions of some of its leading members the reaction was hostile, the Government interpreting such criticism as stemming from an adversarial attitude towards it.

The Government's reaction to certain specific criticisms was to stress the need for a Code of Ethics for Journalists, overlooking the fact that such a Code has been in existence since October 1981.

Certain new programmes in sections of the State electronic media which presented a critical perspective on the issues that were being examined were terminated abruptly and the persons responsible for them were moved out.

There has also been harassment of journalists and even attacks on some senior journalists by unidentified persons in the wake of newspaper exposure and criticism. Some of the incidents have been taken up by media organisations with the Government as being contrary to the assurances that are held out in the Media Policy Statement.

While fear and insecurity characterised much of the media environment in the early nineties insofar as journalists were concerned, the present environment is not altogether free of the twin evils. The difference however, is the growing incidence of journalists' associations not only in the metropolis but also in the outstations. Newspaper editors have for the first time formed a guild of their own, foreign correspondents have organised themselves into an association, and the Free Media Movement has the ear of the Government on issues it raises on behalf of press freedom. That there is strength in numbers and the effectiveness of solidarity are two values that the journalist community has realised somewhat belatedly.

Professionalism lacking

It is lamentable, however, that in several sections of the print and electronic media professionalism is glaringly lacking. So also respect for some of the basic tenets of communication ethics, such as ascertaining the veracity of news items or other stories before publication; fairness in reporting both sides of a story; prompt correction of factual errors with due prominence; avoidance of publication of material prejudicial to pending judicial inquiries; restraint in reporting conflict; caution in publicising security issues pertaining to armed conflict.
Not surprisingly, the Government has accused certain sections of the print medium of acting without a sense of responsibility.

An aspect of responsibility in publication is the duty of care, the obligation to provide factual, balanced and objective news coverage, and to offer a right of reply to inaccurate statements.

Also, freedom to publish implies selection of material that is of public interest or is contributory to public benefit. At times material that is published would perhaps satisfy public curiosity, but would be of little public benefit.

Conclusion

The complexity of the society which the journalist is required by the nature of his undertaking to report and explain, interpret and criticise requires of him a body of knowledge and an intellectual discipline which the specialist in any field possesses.

That was how Walter Lippman, distinguished American journalist and political analyst, perceived journalism as a profession 30 years ago in an address to a conference of the International Press Institute in London.

Now, 30 years later, society is even more complex and the functions of a free and responsible media are more demanding and require a greater degree of professionalism than ever before. While there are a few outstanding exceptions, Sri Lanka's media practitioners in general do not afford convincing evidence that professionalism is a value that receives primacy.