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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Ariya Rubasinghe</td>
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The Role Of Media Institutions In Promoting Pluralism:
Perspective From The Broadcast Media
(From The View Point Of Sri Lanka)

By

Ariya Rubasinghe
ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH
AND INFORMATION CENTRE

SEMINAR ON
'MEDIA & PLURALISM IN SOUTH ASIA'

KATHMANDU - NEPAL
22ND MARCH TO 24TH MARCH 1994

Prepared By
Ariya Rubasinghe (SLAS)
Deputy Director General/Administration
Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation

Title
"The Role of Media Institutions in Promoting Pluralism: Perspective From the Broadcast Media"
(From the viewpoint of SRI LANKA)
The Role of Media Institutions in Promoting Pluralism: Perspectives From the Broadcast Media from the Viewpoint of Sri Lanka

(By Ariya Rubasinghe)

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean with a land area of around 65,000 sq.km and a population of 17.4 million. Economically, Sri Lanka is in the process of becoming a newly industrialised country undergoing transition from its traditional agricultural economy to a market oriented open economy.

1.2 The socio-cultural background of the country indicates a somewhat plural society having one major, and several minor ethno-religious groups. Although all these ethno-religious groups have distinctive characteristics of their own, the country as a whole, in all its socio-economic, cultural and demographic aspects, is undergoing a transitional period. The whole traditional system of values has been subjected to certain inevitable change. The urban population and the younger generation of the country in particular are rapidly becoming modernized and are shedding the traditional values which seem to be hindering their advance towards modernization and industrialization.

1.3 Naturally, there is some resentment towards these changes, but the modernization process cannot be stopped due to the open economic policy adopted since the late 1970's and due to the 'leap-frog' effect of the free flow of information and technology at the turn of this decade. The Impact of "the age of information" seems to be very prominent in Sri Lanka as the Government upheld and promoted the freedom of the press, free flow of the information and pluralism of media in the decade of 1980-1990.
2.0 Objective

2.1 The objective of this paper is to present the Sri Lankan experience in promoting independent and pluralistic media in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan experience is best portrayed against its background of socio-economic and cultural changes.

2.2 Therefore in the first part of this paper I intend presenting a brief socio-economic, cultural and demographic profile of the Sri Lankan population, and in the second part the growth of independent and pluralistic media in the country.

PART I

3.0 Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile

Demographic Characteristics

3.1 The population of the country consists of several ethnic and religious groups. Religion and ethnicities in Sri Lanka are highly inter-related.

3.2 The majority of the population i.e. 74% are Sinhalese and mainly Buddhists. Some of the Sinhalese were converted to Christianity by the Western missionaries, beginning from the 16th century. The total Buddhist population constitutes 70% of the total population.

3.3 The Tamil population of the country consists of around 18% of the total population and they are mainly Hindus. Some of these Tamils were also converted to Christianity by the Western missionaries. The Hindu population accounts for 15% of the total population.
The Roman Catholic and Christian population, consisting mainly of Sinhala and Tamil converts and Burghers, constitutes 8% of the total population.

The Moor and Malay sectors of the population, who are totally Muslims, form around 8% of the total population. Thus the Muslim population accounts for 8% of the total population.

3.4 The extent of the total population of the country has reached the 17.4 million mark with a density of around 265 persons per sq.km. The death rate followed a declining trend since the late 1940's subsequent to the control of malaria epidemics and improvement of public health facilities. Now it has dropped to 6.0 per 1000 of the population. The mortality level of the country is very much similar to that of an economically developed country. The expectation of life at birth has now reached 71.7 years for females and 67.8 years for males.

3.5 The literacy level of the population, 91% for males and 83% for females, is considered to be one of the highest in Asia. Sri Lankans are provided free education from the kindergarten to the university level.

PART II

4.0 Growth of Media

4.1 Press

Printing was introduced to the island by the Dutch in 1739 mainly for the purpose of propagating Christianity. The printing machines were used by the British colonials to publish the Ceylon Gazette in 1802, and they further
improved the printing industry in the country. The first English newspaper 'Colombo Journal' was published in 1832. The 1st Sinhala newspaper 'Lanka Nidhanaya' was published in 1840.

4.2 Now there are four major newspaper institutions which publish three Sinhala dailies, two English dailies and two Tamil dailies. These four institutions also publish three Sinhala, three English and two Tamil Sunday weekly papers. In addition one of these institutions publishes two evening papers in Sinhala and in English. One of these newspaper publishing institutions is a government organisation and the other three are private companies. The dailies and weeklies published by these four newspaper organisations account for around 25 copies per 1000 of the population.

4.3 In addition to these so called national papers, there are three major religious weeklies (two Buddhist and one Catholic) and four major political party weeklies.

4.4 The number of tabloid papers published weekly by private organisations had increased considerably. There are more than 10 such publications but only four of them can be described as popular.

4.5 Apart from these dailies and weeklies there are two astrological weeklies, more than 10 cartoon weeklies and more than 10 children's and educational weeklies. All these publications amount to around 50 copies per 1000 of the population.

4.6 It is a legal requirement to register all printing presses and publications with the Department of National Archives. Thus 1,334 printing presses, 412 periodicals and 100 newspapers
have been registered. The registered publications which disseminate education and information amount to over 850 copies per 1000 of the population per year.

5.0 Cinema

The first Sinhala film was screened in 1947. Now there are around 251 cinema halls with a seating capacity of 137,000 which amounts to around 08 seats per 1000 of the population. The average cinema audience per year is around 31 million. Around 25 local films are being produced annually and over 100 foreign films are being imported mainly from America, Europe and India.

5.0 Radio

Radio broadcasting was introduced to Sri Lanka by the British in 1925 three years after it was introduced to England. Until the beginning of the 1990's, radio broadcasting was a government monopoly and there were separate channels for Sinhala, Tamil and English languages and for commercial and non-commercial programmes. Recently it also introduced FM transmissions.

6.1 Since 1993, the government issued licences to private radio broadcasting companies and now there are three major private FM broadcasting organisations in the country.

6.2 There are around 3.5 million households in the country and almost every household now has a radio set. The government and private commercial broadcasting stations have just begun their competition for popularity.

7.0 Television

Although radio broadcasting was introduced to Sri Lanka just three years after it was introduced to Europe, it took more
than 40 years to introduce television to Sri Lanka. Television broadcasting came to Sri Lanka along with the introduction of the open economic policy in 1977. In 1979, for the first time, a private television company called Independent Television Network (ITN) was given permission to transmit daily television programmes limited to an area of around 20 miles radius from Colombo.

7.1 The government owned national television station called Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, an outright gift from Japan, went on air in 1982, covering around 98% of the land area in the country.

7.2 There were around 2500 licensed TV receivers in the country in 1979. This number increased to around 100,000 with the introduction of Islandwide television in 1982. Now there are around 1.4 million TV receivers in the country, which indicate that there is around one TV receiver for four households or 17-20 persons of the population.

7.3 As the government promoted the privatization of most of the government owned business undertakings and other service institutions, five private commercial television stations came into operation in the 1990’s. The Hongkong based ETV channels I and II (Sports and BBC news) are on the air around the clock in Sri Lanka. The ABN (Asian Business News) is also on the air daily on MTV for about one hour in the morning.

7.4 In Sri Lanka the independence of the media is protected by law. The Press Council of Sri Lanka has been established to look into the rights of the press and the public. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation Act and the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation Act have been formulated to protect and guide the interests and ethical standards of State owned radio and television broadcasting institutions.
The SLRC Act defining the functions and powers of the Corporation clearly states that SLRC shall -

"carry on a television broadcasting service within Sri Lanka to promote and develop that service and maintain high standards in programming in public interest."

It also states that -

"nothing is included in any such programme which offends against good taste or decency or is likely to incite to crime or to lead to disorder or offensive to public feelings."

"the programmes maintain a proper local, regional and international balance and a balance in their subject matter and a high general standard of quality."

"the news given in the programme (in whatever form) is presented with due accuracy and impartiality and with due regard to the public interest."

7.5 Although there is a problem of terrorism in the country, the censorship of news has been withdrawn. The Government also insists that self regulation within the media organisations, both state and private, is better than Government regulation.

8.0 Programme Time
At the inception SLRC transmission time was limited to five hours a day. By 1994 the average telecast time per day has increased to more than 11 to 13 hours.
8.1 Although SLRC is a state owned body, no financial support is given by the Treasury. Over 70% of the Income is derived from advertising and the balance from licensing and other income sources. However, as SLRC is a National institution, advertising has been confined to a 9-10% of the total transmission time.

8.2 As Sri Lanka is a plural society consisting of several ethno-religious groups, SLRC has provided reasonable proportion of its telecast time for the minor ethno-religious groups. Out of the daily total programme time 20% has been devoted to Tamil language programmes for minority groups. Programmes in Sinhala, the language of the majority, consist of only 40% of air time. The balance 40% has been devoted to English language programmes which are common to all ethno-religious groups.

8.3 The Sinhala language, the language of the majority, is the state language as also are Tamil and English. While Tamil is the language of the minority, English is considered the link language.

8.4 The State owned radio station, the SLBC has three main channels to broadcast programmes in Sinhala, Tamil and English and its administrative body consists of members representing all the major ethno-religious groups in the country.

8.5 The state owned TV station, the SLRC, presents programmes in all the three languages and is devoting 1/5th of its air time to Tamil speaking minority groups. Each religion is given half hour programmes on every Sunday apart from major programmes on major religious festivals.
8.6 The private radio and TV stations have also devoted a considerable proportion of their air time for Tamil programmes, whereas a larger proportion of their air time consists of English programmes, catering to all ethnic and religious groups.

8.7 In Sri Lanka, the press, the cinema and the broadcast media have always respected and promoted pluralism in the society.

8.8 In order to enhance the human resources through training, education and professional development, one of the universities has established a separate department for Mass Communication which offers degree as well as post-graduate degree level courses. Two universities offer diploma courses on journalism. There is a separate institution for training television personnel in the fields of programming technology and engineering. The Government is also considering the establishment of an institution to train professional journalists.

8.9 The Government of Sri Lanka has always realised the importance of free flow of information and technology imparted through independent and pluralistic media in the process of economic and spiritual development and in the protection and strengthening of the democratic process in the country. The Government also insists that self regulation within the media organisations, both state and private, is better than Government regulation.

9.0 Role of Broadcast Media in Promoting Pluralism

Promoting pluralism and reflecting the special interests of a pluralistic society are functions which media in a democratic society are expected to perform.
9.1 Broadcast media have a fundamental obligation to be pluralistic in outlook. They have to depend on winning and holding the attention of a pluralistic audience. If they cannot recognize this need, their existence is in jeopardy. First and foremost, media institutions, even those of the State are mainly business enterprises and therefore must survive (and of course prosper) in a highly competitive market environment.

9.2 In Sri Lanka, State Broadcasting stations both television and radio are presently being jolted into awareness of this reality. Until late last year (1993), the State Electronic Broadcasting institutions enjoyed, what could be described as an unchallenged monopoly. Though even under those circumstances the state media did not fail to recognise the need to be pluralistic in their programming, they could have afforded to be unmindful of the need to be pluralistic at that time, if they so wished. But today, it is imperative that the Broadcasting Media of the State should be pluralistic in spirit not only for purposes of survival but also as its over-riding responsibility.

9.3 The Sri Lankan broadcasting media, have recognised their responsibility to be pluralistic in their agenda setting. Today, in Sri Lanka, the pluralism of society and the national make-up is not a mere objective truth. It has other levels of significance too. The pluralism is very much felt. Today, it is difficult to plan broadcasting programmes on the assumption that the receiving society is by and large homogeneous. It is not at all so. The audience is pluralistic in many ways. Primarily they are pluralistic in ethnic terms. They have a pluralism of religious professions. Linguistically they are pluralistic. These are only the major and predominant ways in which the receiving society turns out to be pluralistic. In other subtle ways too the present day Sri Lankan society is pluralistic. The society is divided into several micro-groups in terms of their political views.
There are other groups, holding a variety of ideologies. The youth form a vociferous sub-culture contributing substantially to the pluralism of society.

The Sri Lankan national media policy has as one of its major directions the safeguarding of the interests of the pluralistic society. Sri Lanka's Minister of Information and Broadcasting Hon Tyronne Fernando has put this commitment into words in a recent public statement in which he states -

"I uphold freedom of expression as an esteemed national and human value. The curtailment of the right and the privilege people have, to express their view freely, goes undoubtedly counter to cherished ideals of human rights. The age-old cultural traditions of Sri Lanka have over the long centuries provided the ideal context for toleration of all views. We will continue to protect, safeguard and nourish those traditions."

The recognition of the pluralistic nature of the Sri Lankan society is reflected in the innovative moves launched by television and radio broadcasting at State sector level in Sri Lanka. Earlier, especially in the days of British rule, radio broadcasting was primarily for sophisticated urban users. The others especially rural folk listened in because the medium fascinated them. A special concession was not made for them. But currently, the radio broadcasting structure of the State owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation has several rural broadcasting stations. These are located in rural centres and are intimately linked with rural communities. Some of these have become so functional in their rural contexts, that
the villagers seek the help of the Broadcasting station for redress of their grievances. The State Television station, the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, is currently in the process of launching a special rural service. This is in unerring recognition of the need to be pluralistic in its programming.

9.7 The SLRC has always been mindful to be alert to the interests of the pluralistic element of the receiving society. Television broadcasting in all three State languages is the most fundamental recognition of the pluralism of Sri Lankan society. The entertainment programmes too are pluralistic in concept and presentation. Teledramas are telecast in all three languages. Sinhala and Tamil teledramas are produced locally for the most part with a view to catering to the specific needs in entertainment of a receiving segment of the community. English programmes of entertainment are by and large imported. But, in the selection of these for local broadcasting the needs of the particular segment of the receiving society are kept, very much in mind.

9.8 All these imply that to be pluralistic in reality in the matter of broadcasting, meaningful agenda setting is essential. This agenda setting has to identify the key issues of the day.

9.9 To be properly pluralistic, the broadcast media must provide the forum for all elements, enabling intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokesmen of a variety of causes and interest groups. In recent months, the SLRC has acted in terms of this need. Recognising the need to accommodate viewpoints that may even conflict with the attitudes adopted by the State, the SLRC aired programmes in which opposition viewpoints were given adequate opportunities for airing. An Important
development in the matter of recognising pluralism is a sense of respect for all significant viewpoints. With this in mind, arrangements are always made to allow all to enter into national dialogues through the television and radio broadcasts.

9.10 In Sri Lanka a reflection of the tolerance of all varieties of viewpoints is quite clearly reflected in our religious programmes. All religions are given the opportunity to telecast their specific programmes. Over and above this, religious festivals of all denominations are accommodated on television and radio programmes.

9.11 An essential feature of pluralism in broadcasting should be the acceptance of the need of the masses to be critical of certain developments. If such opportunity for due criticism is not made available, the pluralistic nature of the media is very likely to be marred. In the absence of proper criticism, a state of monopoly will invariably come into being.

9.12 In this context Sri Lanka television and radio broadcasting institutions can be characterised as totally and fully dedicated to the ideals of pluralism in media.