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Mass Communication in Ceylon

by

D C Ranatunga
CEYLON - GENERAL

* The Island of Ceylon lies 22 miles from the nearest point of South India, 400 miles north of the equator.

* Ceylon has an area of 25,332 sq. miles - 270 miles long and 140 miles wide at the widest point.

* Ceylon's population is 12.7 million (12,747,755 - 1971 Census).

* 52% of the population are males and 48% females. Annual rate of growth is 2.3%.

* Racially the population is divided between -
  Sinhalese: 70%
  Tamils 22% - Ceylon Tamils 11%; Indian Tamils 11%.
  Ceylon Moors: 6%
  Others: 2% - Burghers, Eurasions, Malays.

* By religion Buddhists form the vast majority (66%). The balance consist of Hindus (18%) Christians (9%) Muslims (7%).

* Sinhala, the language of the majority is the official language and the medium of instruction in schools and universities, but due chiefly to a century and a half of British rule, English is widely spoken and understood. Tamil is spoken by the Tamils.

* The rate of literacy is quite high. Leaving out children under 5 years, literacy has reached 78%. 24% of the population have had, at least a secondary education.

* 80% of the population live in rural areas. Only 20% in urban areas.

* 40% of the population are under 14 years. 55% are under 21 years.

Continued...
On a socio-economic basis, the population can be divided into:

(i) Urban upper and middle classes: Monthly income over 500 rupees; Professionals/white collar workers/teachers - income 200 - 500 rupees a month.

(ii) Urban working classes.

(iii) Rural and estate population.

CHANNELS OF MASS COMMUNICATION IN CEYLON

The Press and sound Radio have been the principal channels of mass communication in Ceylon. Since Independence in 1948 the growth of the Sinhalese Press - the language of 80% of the population has been phenomenal. One Sinhala newspaper sells over 350,000 copies on a Sunday morning and its rivals show up creditably. One Sinhala daily sells 125,000 copies.

It is estimated that there are at least 800,000 radio sets in the island. The number of families having radio sets is estimated to be around 500,000 and allowing a minimum of 5 people to a set, it would mean that every day nearly one fourth of the population (2.5 million) listen to the radio.

According to the Media Survey conducted by the Audit Bureau of Circulation in 1967, 58% of the male population and 28% of the female population claim to read newspapers; 38% men and 19% women listen to the radio; 37% men and 14% women visit the cinema regularly.

About 80% men and 50% women can be contacted by one of the three media - Press, Radio and Cinema. The urban areas are fully covered. In rural areas, 25% men and 60% women are not contacted by any media.

There is no Television in Ceylon and the likelihood of introducing television in the near future is remote.

Direct contact with the people - through meetings, rallies, distribution of leaflets and the like - remains the most effective form of mass communication. This is particularly evident during election time by the large numbers turning up at election meetings and the interest taken by candidates in contacting the voters direct.
THE PRESS

The Ceylon Press has a long history dating back to 1802 when the first ever newspaper - the GOVERNMENT GAZETTE - was published. The first newspaper to be published in Sinhala, the language of the vast majority of the people, was LANKALOKA in 1860. This was followed in 1864 by the first Tamil newspaper, UDAYA TARAKAI (Morning Star).

Today there are at least 18 dailies and a dozen Sunday newspapers, published by seven groups of newspapers. These cover different shades of political opinion, different levels of education and a wide range of interests.

Several weeklies are published (mainly in Sinhala) covering cultural, astrological, religious and literary subjects.

Three newspaper groups dominate the field. They are:

(i) The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd; - a private company founded in 1909, publishing 5 dailies, 3 Sunday newspapers, 5 cultural and religious weeklies, 1 fortnightly and 4 annuals.

(ii) The Times of Ceylon Ltd; - a public company founded in 1846 publishing 3 dailies, 2 Sunday newspapers, 1 women's weekly, 1 monthly magazine and 1 annual;

(iii) The Independent Newspapers Ltd; - a private company founded in 1961 by a group with a successful business in book publishing, with 5 dailies, 3 Sunday newspapers, 2 weeklies and 1 monthly.

A Fourth group - the Virakesari Ltd; a private company founded in 1930 - concentrates on Tamil publications - with 2 dailies, and 2 weekend publications.

Each of these organisations is controlled by a small group of persons, thus creating a great degree of monopoly.

The Press Commission which did an exhaustive study of the Press in Ceylon in 1964 reported thus: "This concentration of ownership is incompatible with the freedom of the Press, and in conjunction with the circulation of these papers and their readership, it has produced a concentration of power in the hands of a few men which is capable of dangerous abuse, and has in fact been gravely abused by the suppression of opinion and the distortion of news, as is evident from the overwhelming evidence before us. This concentration, if not broken up, would endanger not only the freedom of the
Press but the welfare of the country as well". (Sessional Paper IX - 1964).

The Commission recommended the setting up of a State Corporation to run daily newspapers, but with the change of government no further action was taken.

Meanwhile, the interests which felt that their viewpoint was being ignored by the 'Capitalist' or 'monopoly' press, began publishing their own newspapers. Thus three new companies have grown up since 1964. These are -

(i) the publishers of 'Aththa' formed by an influential group of the Ceylon Communist Party. This Sinhala morning daily has a wide readership and contributed in no small measure to the election of the present United Front government. Though the Communist Party is one of the constituent parties of the present government, the paper follows a policy of critically examining government policy and actions.

(ii) Suriya Publishers Ltd; formed by a group of the other left party, the Lanka Samaasamaja Party publishes a daily (currently suspended) and a Sunday edition.

(iii) Sri Lanka Mahajana Newspapers Ltd; - a private limited liability company under the chairmanship of Mrs. Bandaranaike, publishing a daily in Sinhala and a Sunday edition.

Mrs. Bandaranaike's government, in its first Throne Speech in June 1970 indicated its policy towards the Press thus; "The freedom of the Press will be ensured. Independent newspapers will be encouraged as a means to end the present domination of the daily press by capitalist monopolies".

Though no official statement has yet been made, it is likely that legislation would be introduced shortly for the setting up of a Press Council to safeguard the freedom of the Press by seeking to maintain the highest professional standards. The setting up of a national news agency is also under consideration. Both these are measures recommended by the Press Commission referred to earlier.

Pattern of readership

The Media Survey - 1967 revealed that urban readership is more intensive than in rural areas. The readership of the Sinhala publications spread evenly among all groups while
English readership is confined to urban middle classes. There is little duplication between English and Sinhala publications.

The most widely read type of publication is the morning daily and most readers spend at least 15 minutes reading it. Local and foreign news receive the greatest amount of attention followed by sports news and the editorial.

Borrowing and lending of newspapers is a widespread habit. In urban areas most people read them at home because they buy every issue. Some read in their offices. In rural areas most people read the newspapers outside their homes – in eating houses, boutiques and community centres.

Most newspaper readers are regular readers, reading every issue. About one fourth of the readers glance through them.

The readership of morning dailies among men is 48% and among women 14%. The numbers are much less for the evening dailies – men 15% and women 6%. The Sunday editions enjoy a readership of 43% among men and 22% among women. The majority of Sunday readers spend more than a hour reading the newspapers, and are generally read in instalments.

The readership of other weeklies (apart from week-end editions of newspapers) is on a much lower level than the newspapers. Only 20% men and 12% women read these. The fortnightlies and monthlies are on even a lower level.

RADIO

A regular broadcasting service was started in Ceylon in 1925 – five years after broadcasting was introduced in Europe.

A government department of Broadcasting was set up in 1949. Its functions were taken over by a state sponsored Corporation in 1967.

The number of radio sets which stood at 125 in 1925 increased to 10,000 in 1941, and rose to 90,000 in 1954 and to 405,000 by 1965. The importation of radio sets was banned in 1960 due to the stringent foreign exchange situation, thus affecting listenership. Following the assembly of radio sets locally, the situation has somewhat eased during the past two or three years.
Today the number of licensed radio sets is around 360,000 but it is estimated that the total holding of sets is about 800,000.

The number of families having radio sets is estimated to be around 500,000 and allowing a minimum of 5 persons to a set, it would mean that everyday nearly one fourth of the population (2.5 million) listen to the radio.

The services run by the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation are divided into three sections - Sinhala, Tamil and English - on the basis of language. Each service in turn is divided into the National and Commercial Services. An Educational Service too is in operation.

A survey done in 1967 revealed that daily listenership was in the region of 39% of the population and weekly listenership over 52%.

The vast majority of the listeners are Sinhalese (65% of radio families - 325,000). The balance is constituted of Tamils (35% - 150,000 families) and Burghers, Europeans and others (5% - 25,000 families).

According to the media survey (1967), 47% men and 24% women listen to the radio regularly. The proportion of listenership in urban areas is much higher than in rural areas.

The majority of listeners claim to listen daily. In urban areas, they listen at home but in rural areas most of them listen either in the bazaar or in community centres.

The Commercial Service is the most popular service. 38% men and 19% women claim to listen to the Commercial Service regularly. Among both men and women, musical broadcasts are the most popular programmes. As their second choice, men prefer news while women prefer theatre and religious programmes.

The CBC conducts regular listenership surveys in the Colombo area, which has the highest concentration of listeners (60%). These surveys are based on a diary system where a number of selected listeners are requested to maintain a diary of listening for a period of eight days. These surveys are done at least twice a year.
Qualitative analysis for selected programmes are also made with the help of selected panels.

A listeners' research project was carried out recently when listeners were offered prizes for a combination of programmes they selected. Listeners were requested to listen in to as many programmes as possible broadcast within a particular month and evaluate them from the point of view of content, presentation, and production, and place the first ten in order of preference. Each listener could send in any number of entries (from forms published in the Radio Times, the weekly publication giving details of programmes for the coming week), and could participate in all three language services.

The listenership surveys have revealed that the 18-25 year age group listen mostly to the radio. The highest rate of listening has been recorded among the upper and upper middle classes in the socio-economic groups.

The Sinhala Commercial Service is rated the most popular service with 54% of the listeners claiming to listen in regularly. The Sinhala National Service is second with 48% followed by Tamil Commercial Service (34%) and Tamil National Service (33%).

The most popular programmes are light music, news and religious programmes.

Battery operated sets are the most popular type. Even in areas having electricity, there are many homes without electricity.

The CBC broadcasts news bulletins in all three languages in the morning, afternoon and at night, and in the remote areas villagers now listen to the early morning news bulletin regularly. These people get their newspaper either by noon or late in the afternoon.

Most listeners in the rural areas had to depend on short wave listening and the quality of reception was rather poor. Since of late, the CBC has set up medium wave booster stations in a number of places which has helped to improve the reception quality.
A Training Institute was set up by the CBC in 1968 to produce better broadcasters and skilled technicians for service in the Corporation. Judging from the quality of most programmes, however, the Institute does not seem to have performed much useful purpose yet. There is room for improvement in every field of broadcasting activity and the need for regular courses in various forms of broadcasting like talks, drama, news, singing etc; can be seen.

CINEMA

Foreign films were imported and exhibited in Ceylon since the beginning of this century. The first sound film was screened in 1929.

The indigenous film industry is just 25 years old. The early films made in Sinhala, were shot and processed in South India, and although the actors were Ceylonese, the Directors and Technicians were in most cases Indian.

The effect of using Indian technicians in the making of Sinhala films has been summed up by the Film Commission (1965) thus: "Even when the first studios were established in Ceylon, studio owners and producers continued to import South Indian technicians, particularly for the more skilled and specialised tasks of film-making. It was no doubt inevitable in the early stages of the national industry, when local skills were undeveloped, that the industry should have fallen back on the services of foreign technicians. But it was nothing short of a disaster for the Sinhala film that the powers in command of the industry should have regarded South India as the only source from which they could import technical skills. They took this attitude not only because of the proximity of this centre of film making but also because of their long established trade links with the South Indian industry and because of their own conceptions of film-making had been cast in the same mould. The Madras studios were their dream world and their inspiration.

"The tendency to regard the South Indian film as a model for the Sinhala film and the making of Sinhala films in South India has already imposed on the infant national film from its birth, the stamp of bastardy. The import of South Indian technicians, directors, cameramen, sound recordists, music directors and others -
into Ceylon continued and accentuated this taint. But what the South Indian technicians contributed was a style which was not only alien but also inferior from the standpoint of the development of world cinema and which therefore retarded the growth of the Sinhala film, whether as an expression of the national way of life or as an artistic medium".

The coming of the Sinhala film brought an entirely new audience into the cinemas and this, coupled with the natural growth of the film going habit consequent on increasing urbanisation and the spread of education accelerated the growth of the film industry.

Today there are 272 cinemas in the island with a seating capacity of 161,000. The total show seats per week is 2,610,200. The average attendance per week is estimated at 40%.

37% adult males and 14% females visit the cinema regularly, i.e. at least once a month. The habit is stronger in men than women. Majority see films once a month or less often.

The Sinhala films are the most popular, followed by Tamil, English and Hindi. In urban areas, the English films are more popular than Tamil films.

The largest audience is for the evening show - 6 p.m. Morning shows (normally held on weekends) are the least attended.

Three big companies dominate the film industry in Ceylon and these are responsible for the import, distribution and exhibition of films. The three companies are:

(i) Ceylon Theatres Ltd; - a public company founded in 1928. Runs a studio too through its associated company, Ceylon Studios Ltd; - also a public company.

(ii) Cinemas Ltd; - a private company set up in 1949 - also owns a studio.

(iii) Ceylon Entertainments Ltd; - a private company founded in 1946.
These three companies can rightly be described as the main groups in the local industry not only because of the scale of their financial resources and operations, dwarfing those of all other interests in the industry, but also because they are the only enterprises to engage in all sectors of the industry - import, distribution, exhibition and production. Two of them (Ceylon Theatres and Cinemas) have also financed independent producers of films and have virtually been the only effective sources of finance for indigenous film-making.

Over the past few years, there has been a great deal of agitation about the 'monopolistic' situation of the local film industry and for the need for the State to step in and help the indigenous film producer. This agitation resulted in the appointment of a Royal Commission in 1962. Its report was published in 1965, but the recommendations were not implemented until a few months ago when the first step in the implementation of its main recommendation was taken.

Legislation for the setting up of a State Film Corporation has been passed by Parliament and the Corporation is expected to be set up early next year. The Corporation will -

(a) take over the import and distribution of foreign films in Ceylon;
(b) promote and advance film production in Ceylon;
(c) award prizes, grant financial assistance and conduct training programmes in the field of film production;
(d) explore local and foreign markets for locally produced films and grant healthy protection from foreign competition.

It is also hoped that local producers of Sinhala and Tamil films would be provided with the necessary tax reliefs for a few years.

The Corporation will function through a Board of Directors composed of a Chairman nominated by the Minister of Broadcasting and Information, 3 ex-officio members namely the Director of Information, the Director of Cultural Affairs and the Director-General of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation, and six other members of whom two would represent the Universities and two would be men of experience in the film industry.
The chief executive officer of the Corporation would be a General Manager who would be assisted by a suitable staff.

The Corporation would have a Fund of its own with an initial grant of ten million rupees by the government.

GOVERNMENT INFORMATION NETWORK

The Department of Information, set up under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, is responsible for liaison with press, radio and cinema on behalf of the government.

The Department is headed by a Director of Information, usually a senior member of the Ceylon Administrative Service. The Government Film Unit and the Government Publications Bureau also come under his charge.

Fifteen Press Officers brief mass media about the workings of different Ministries and government departments. They also maintain liaison with public organisations, trade unions, youth organisations and schools, and assist in the drafting of messages and speeches for the Ministers.

The main function of the Department of Information is to act as the link between the Government and the Press. This is done through briefings, press conferences, press releases, communique, supply of press photographs and background briefing notes and articles, and press tours. These facilities are also made available to the News division of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation.

The Department publishes a regular news sheet - SRI LANKA - in Sinhala and Tamil. This provides information about policies and programmes of the government. This publication is distributed through Members of Parliament government officers, community centres, schools, temples, children's societies and individual addresses. Over 150,000 copies are distributed free.

CEYLON NEWSLETTER - an English language weekly digest of Ceylon news for Ceylon's missions abroad, and CEYLON TODAY - an English language bi-monthly are also published by the Department.

Special booklets and pamphlets are put out to publicise the policies and projects of the government.
Although a considerable amount of money is spent by government in publishing these, the impact seems to be rather ineffective. These have to be made more readable and attractive, with lots of pictures that would catch the eye of the reader. More attention has to be paid to the layout, design and printing of these.

Occasional pamphlets specially produced are a powerful medium through which to keep the people informed. These should be well got up and written in popular style, with figures and pictures to illustrate the points that have to be driven home to the people.

In dealing with the role and responsibility of the Government Information Department, the Commission on Broadcasting and Information (1966) said:

"A Government Information Department has a significant and responsible role in assisting the implementation of policy. To obtain the necessary measure of public understanding and co-operation, the authorities concerned must be able to measure public reactions, and attitudes towards their policies. Official information has to be carried out well, if at all; and it has to be carried out continuously and on an adequate scale.

"The Government Information Services must above all be reliable. They must command a full measure of public confidence and respect. They should only be undertaken in support of clearly defined policies and intentions. They should aim at encouraging public discussions of issues involved even if such discussion involved criticism.

"The Information Department in Ceylon must seek to play a meaningful role by actively and imaginatively interpreting and explaining the policy and actions of the government in such fields as agriculture, industry, food, education, housing, town planning, health and community development, matters which touch the day-to-day life of the people. No large private organisation today can ignore public relations. The government has a greater need to communicate with the public through its own voice."
GOVERNMENT FILM UNIT

The Government Film Unit functions as a unit of the Department of Information, under a separate Director.

It was established in 1948 with the leftovers of cameras and other equipment used for newsreel making during the second world war by the British, and the equipment brought here by some enthusiastic Italians. The objective in setting up the Unit was to make documentary films and newsreels depicting the local scene.

Among the early documentaries produced by the Unit, "New Horizons" dealing with the problems of settling farmers in the new colonization schemes, George Wickremasinghe’s "Rebirth of a River Valley", which tells the story of the mammoth Galoya project and Lester James Pieris' "Conquest of the Dry Zone" are considered outstanding.

The newsreels and documentaries made by the Film Unit (in 35 mm) are screened throughout the island in cinemas and through cinema vans of the Information department. A fleet of 19 mobile units are available and efforts are being made to increase the number of film shows at the village level.

Government Agents who are in charge of the administration in the different districts throughout the country, draw up programmes for film shows in their areas in consultation with local bodies and public organisations. The shows are held in open parks, schools, community centres, village fairs, temples and other places where villagers in large numbers can gather. These programmes have helped government officers to involve the people in health, agricultural and rural development projects. They also provide a source of free entertainment to the villagers. Yet the efforts do not seem to have yielded much results.

Over the years, there has been constant criticism about the Film Unit and the Broadcasting Commission(1966) commented that "it is clear that the Government Film Unit is drifting aimlessly and giving a poor return for the large sums of money spent on equipment, materials and staff. No clear policy has been laid down either for its present work or future development".
For years, the weekly or fortnightly newsreel consisted of a few items showing ministers or other politicians cutting the first sod, cutting a ribbon or lighting the traditional oil lamp. Hardly any attention was paid to enlightening the public on matters important in their lives.

A change in policy has been noticed in recent months and now the weekly newsreel—titled NEW REPORT—places emphasis on economic development and public participation in the activities of the government. Plans have been drawn up to take the Five Year Economic Plan, just prepared, to the people through cinema.

LIMITATIONS FOR PROGRESS

Due to the present economic situation in Ceylon, expansion in the sphere of mass communication is being affected adversely. Take, for example, the introduction of television to Ceylon. Costs are prohibitive even to introduce television on an experimental basis. At a time when it is difficult to find adequate foreign exchange to import even essential items like food and clothing, Ceylon cannot afford luxuries like television.

There have been offers of aid to set up television in Ceylon. The equipment was being offered as an outright grant. But the costs involved in maintaining such equipment would be prohibitive. It has been estimated that quite apart from the equipment, a minimum number of television sets to justify the operation would cost Rs. 8 million. The drain on foreign exchange would thus be quite a tidy sum in the present context of things.

Leaving aside the economics of introducing television, politically too it would create problems, in a situation when the government is making an all out effort to reduce the gap between the haves and the have nots.

There are economic constraints on the current forms of mass media as well. Once again, due to the non-availability of sufficient foreign exchange, government has been compelled to cut down the import of newsprint and printing machinery. Higher costs of raw materials and higher rates have resulted in higher costs of production. Thus the newspaper reader today has to pay more money for less pages of...
his newspaper.

Although the demand for cheaper radio sets has increased considerably, there are severe restrictions in the import of essential parts for local manufacture of sets. Spares are either too expensive or hard to get in the local market.

In its efforts to improve the reception quality of the broadcasts, the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation has been lucky in obtaining foreign assistance. Any future expansion programmes will also be possible only on foreign aid.

The film industry too has been hit badly due to the exchange situation. It is difficult to purchase raw film, chemicals and other equipment. There is a total ban on the import of colour film. Thus no colour films are made here.

In short mass media operates under trying economic circumstances in Ceylon. This in turn means the importance of face-to-face contact and the need to develop points of such contact by means of community centres, rural development centres, Peoples Committees, Village Councils and the like.

MASS COMMUNICATION AS A SUBJECT

Hardly any interest has been shown by authorities in Ceylon to include Mass Communication as a subject in the school curriculum or any higher educational institution.

The only instance when at least some attention was paid to the subject was when it was decided to award a Diploma in Mass Communication to students who followed a course in one of the Junior University Colleges. This was in 1969 when students who had passed the GCE Advanced Level examination and qualified to enter the Universities but could not do so due to problems of accommodation, were admitted to Junior University Colleges which conducted courses of studies that were not taught at the Universities.

The two year course in Mass Communication was intended to form an integral part of the national scheme of education formulated at the time, and was designed "to fulfill the long felt and sustained demand" of those students seeking specialised training in fields such as journalism, radio and T.V. Broadcasting, Advertising and Public Relations,
Communication Arts and Advance Research in newspaper journalism.

The course objectives were:

(a) To assist the students to secure basic knowledge and skills in the different fields of Mass Communication.

(b) To equip the student to apply himself confidently to vocational and technical careers.

(c) To enable the student as a citizen of this country to fulfill his duties and professional and civic obligations and responsibility honestly and creditably.

(d) To promote knowledge and encourage research with a view to exploring new avenues in the domain of the science of Mass Communication.

(e) To assist in the course of national integration, progress and development by providing the country with suitable and competent personnel.

The course was divided into parts -

(a) The core programme and
(b) The Specialization programme.

The Core programme was given in the first year.

At the completion of the core programme the students were expected to select a given course from among the specialization programme.

The specialisation programme consisted of two courses:

(i) Newspaper journalism.

(ii) Advertising and Public Relations.

Only the first batch of students was able to complete the course since with the change of government last year it was decided to close down the Junior University Colleges under the new educational policy.

The outline of a new scheme of education has been announced but no provision has been made for the teaching of Mass Communication, at any level.

Even in the big newspaper organisations, there are no facilities at all for the training of journalists. The recruits (sometimes University graduates but very often persons with much less educational qualifications) have to
groped in the dark and learn the job.

The Training Institute of the CBC has still not been able to organise a proper scheme for training those interested in broadcasting.

Lack of facilities to train Press Officers and other staff in the Information Department has hindered the progress of the State Information network.

Thus any assistance for training persons presently employed in the field of Mass Communications as well as others interested in such activity would be most welcome.


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