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Plurality And Diversity Of Sources And Outlets

By

Victor Gunawardene
MEDIA WORKSHOP ON COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

Organised by

AMIC/WACC/SLFI/SLTTI

PLURALITY AND DIVERSITY OF SOURCES AND OUTLETS

By

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Sri Lanka Foundation Institute
16-17th March, 1987
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Limitations of Scope

The scope of this paper is limited by several factors. The first of them is the time frame of 45 minutes for both presentation and discussion, which necessarily entails presentation of the subject only in outline without much analysis or discussion. Hence the paper makes the various points briefly in the hope they could be expanded upon during discussion of the presentation.

Secondly, there is a measure of overlap in the content of this subject and those of some of the other subjects for discussion during this workshop. Consequently, this paper seeks to emphasise those aspects which cohere more directly and more closely with the subject of "Plurality and Diversity of Sources and Outlets" while also touching on certain aspects of other subjects of this workshop programme which have a bearing on the main subject of this paper.

Thirdly, the analysis of the subject is attempted in broad terms. Generalisations may therefore become necessary but the points sought to be made should not on that account lose their validity.

Fourthly, this paper does not attempt to look at the technological aspects of the challenges facing communication in Sri Lanka, mainly because the focus of this study is not with modernisation of production and distribution technology, although that is relevant to a media workshop such as this. The focus of this study is on the challenges facing communication as a social phenomenon and an examination of communication processes as a reflection of social reality in Sri Lanka.
Fifthly, the external dimension of the communication process — how news and information and visual and auditory programmes of entertainment that have their origin outside Sri Lanka come into the country, their sources, type, quality, regularity, cost, etc. — is outside the scope of this study, notwithstanding the importance of each of those aspects.

This paper is purposively limited in order that it may focus its attention on the subject in an issue-oriented manner that would be directly relevant to the theme of "Communication challenges in Sri Lanka". It must, however, be stated at the very outset that the paper does not offer solutions to the problems it identifies. Nevertheless, it hints at strategies and approaches that may yield solutions.

**Conceptualisation**

The term "plurality" and "diversity" warrant denotation, if not definition, at the outset itself. "Diversity" presents no semantic problems. It is the quality or state of being diverse, distinct, different or dissimilar. But the concept of "plurality" is hardly illumined by the explanation that it is the state of being plural. The expression "pluralism" is derived from a metaphysical theory that reality is not an organic whole but is composed of a plurality of independent or interdependent entities. Plurality could be said to mean a state or condition of society in which members of diverse groups of structures — be they social, cultural, religious, linguistic or ethnic — maintain a distinct identity although they inhabit a common territory and form part of a larger, shared polity and have access to goods and services in common. In that sociological sense, Sri Lanka is a plural society — We are plural in ethnicity — Sinhalese, Tamil, Moor, Indian Tamil, Malay, Burgher; plural in religion — Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian; plural in language, Sinhala, Tamil and English. In turn, within each of these distinct identities there are also diversities — differences of physiognomy, age, socio-economic class, occupation, culture, upbringing, outlook, etc.
Thus within each distinct group or structural identity there are also plural identities which introduce a measure of dilution of homogeneity within the group. While "diversity" denotes being different, distinct or dissimilar, "plurality" denotes a spectrum of different identities, each of which has a claim to equality of status and is deserving of recognition.

Communication as a social phenomenon

The human person is by nature a social being and tends towards his or her growth and development through a multiplicity of processes of interaction with other persons, groups and collectivities and with forms and structures of social organisation. They range from the unit of the nuclear family to the entire nation, (confirming ourselves for the time being to a single country). The interaction between the individual and the group is motivated generally to contribute mutually to the individual's own development as well as that of society. The process of interaction necessarily entails communication, both horizontally and vertically, the giving and receiving of messages both formal and non-formal, verbal, visual and auditory, the use of signs, symbols, sounds, pictures and formal language itself.

The need to communicate is a basic aspect of human nature and is fundamental to civilised human existence. It is one of those expressive rights that are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in the constitutions of many countries. The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka recognises this right in Article 14 (1) (a) which reads:"Every citizen is entitled to - the freedom of speech and expression including publication".

(a) Constitutional Aspects

The constitutional guarantee of this right is subject, however, "to such restriction as may be prescribed by law in the interests of racial and religious harmony or in relation to parliamentary privilege, contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence". (Article 15 (2)).
It is pertinent at this stage to make a few observations on the constitutional guarantee pertaining to this right of the freedom of speech. Firstly, the right is guaranteed ordinarily to every citizen of Sri Lanka. Further, if a person, who, not being a citizen of any other country, has been permanently and legally resident in Sri Lanka immediately prior to the commencement of the Constitution and continues to be so resident, he or she shall be entitled, for a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution, to the exercise of this right. (Article 14 (2)). Thus, non-citizens of Sri Lanka who are eligible to exercise this right in this country have a constitutional guarantee for its exercise only until October 1988. Thereafter the right is deemed to be guaranteed only in respect of the country's citizens.

The second observation and one immediately relevant to this workshop is that Article 14 (1) (a) provides no guarantee of the freedom of information, whereas the right to information is explicit in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19). It reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers". Its omission in the Constitution of 1972 and 1978 is serious and detracts from the guarantee contained in Article 14 (1) (a).

It is significant that prior to the adoption of the Declaration by the United Nations in December 1948 the General Assembly in 1946 adopted Resolution 59 (1) declaring - "Freedom of Information is a fundamental right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated .. Freedom of Information requires as an indispensable element the willingness and capacity to employ its privileges without abuse. It requires as a basic discipline the moral obligation to seek the facts without prejudice and to spread knowledge without malicious intent ...."
Freedom of information is a right that is rooted in the individual's need to know what is relevant for his/her own development as well as to enable him/her to participate purposefully and optimally in the development of the social community to which he/she belongs. From the need to know follows the right to know, and it is the responsibility of the State to ensure that the citizen's need to know is provided for adequately.

(b) Legal Restrictions

But in Sri Lanka not only is there no explicit constitutional guarantee of the right to know, but also there is no Freedom of Information Act. On the contrary, there are legal restrictions on the right to know and on access to official information. The provisions of section 16 of the Press Council Law of 1973 prohibit —

The publication of Cabinet proceedings, or any part thereof, any matter which purports to be the contents or any part of the contents of Cabinet documents, Cabinet decisions, the contents, or any part of the contents of any document sent by any Minister or sent to any Minister or sent to or by the Secretary to the Cabinet of Ministers, unless approved for publication in the newspaper by the Secretary to the Cabinet.

Violation of any of the provisions of Section 16 of this law is an offence, the penalty for which is a fine not exceeding Rs.5,000 or imprisonment of either description for a term not exceeding two years, or both such fine and imprisonment. Where any offence under this Law is committed through a newspaper not only is a penal liability attached to the person committing the offence but also a vicarious liability is attached to the proprietor, publisher, printer, editor and journalist of such newspaper unless such person can prove that the offence was committed without his knowledge or that he exercised all due diligence to prevent the commission of the offence.

The definition of "newspaper" is so wide as to include within its ambit not only printed news sheets but also mimeographed or otherwise reproduced sheets, circulars, house journals etc. containing "news, intelligence or occurrences".
The provisions of Section 16 of the Press Council Law are at variance with some of the objectives of the very same Law as set out in Section 8. Sub-section 1 of Section 8 sets out as an objective ensuring the freedom of the press in Sri Lanka. Sub-section 2 states the objective of ensuring that newspapers will be free to publish as news true statements of fact and any comments based upon true statements of fact. One of the objectives of sub-section 6 is "to keep under review developments likely to restrict the supply of information of public interest and importance and developments in the Sri Lanka press which may tend towards concentration or monopoly and to suggest appropriate remedial measures thereto".

The importance of freedom of information was underlined not only by the General Assembly of the United Nations but also by the UNESCO Declaration of 1978 on the Mass Media, which states at Article 11 (2) as follows:

"Access by the public to information should be guaranteed by the diversity of the sources and means of information available to it, thus enabling each individual to check the accuracy of facts and to appraise events objectively. To this end, journalists must have freedom to report and the fullest possible facilities of access to information. Similarly, it is important that the mass media be responsive to concerns of peoples and individuals, thus promoting the participation of the public in the elaboration of information".


Officialisation of Information Process

In the Sri Lankan context the prohibitions contained in Section 16 of the Press Council Law of 1973 have wider implications. Not only are some of the prohibitions at variance with the concept of freedom of information, which the Sri Lanka
Government as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is committed to uphold because that right is explicit in Article 19 of that Covenant, but also the prohibitions are a continuing constraint on the communication process. Consequently, public access to socially relevant information including information about State policies, impending or proposed legislation and other such material which could be the basis of informed discourse to facilitate democratic participation of the citizenry in the governance of the polity is limited to what is duly authorised by the State for publication. Such constraint tends to an officialisation of the information process in that a form of censorship is exercised by the State on information which the media could have access to on their own or on information which they might already have obtained but are restrained from publishing because of the legal requirement of official authorisation. Thus a potential plurality of information sources is curbed and the information flow pertaining to vital matters of public interest is canalised to a single official source.

Another aspect of the prohibitions referred to is that they apply also to Ministry proposals for legislation which are the subject matter of a document submitted by a Ministry for the consideration of the Cabinet. Since the Cabinet is charged with the direction and control of the Government and is collectively responsible and answerable to Parliament, all Bills other than private member's bills must have the prior approval of the Cabinet. Therefore, a Ministry proposal intended to be the basis of legislation comes within the ambit of the prohibitions referred to in Section 16 and the content of the proposed legislation cannot be published in the newspapers unless authorised officially.

If it is not so authorised, the public would ordinarily come to know of proposed legislation only when a Bill is gazetted. The Constitution (Article 78 (1)) requires that every Bill be published in the Gazette at least seven days before it is placed on the Order Paper of Parliament. The time allowed to the public
to challenge the constitutionality of a Bill by invoking the constitutional jurisdiction of the Supreme Court in writing is a limit of one week of the Bill being placed on the Order Paper of Parliament. If the Bill bears an endorsement that in the view of the Cabinet of Ministers it is urgent in the national interest, the provisions of Article 78 (1) have no application and the Supreme Court is required to make a special determination regarding constitutional consistency within 24 hours (or a period not exceeding three days as the President may specify) of the Court assembling.

Thus it will be observed that if the content of proposed legislation cannot be publicised after the document has been sent by a Ministry to the Cabinet or while it is under consideration by the Cabinet or thereafter unless officially authorised, the public would have an opportunity of knowing its content only when the Bill is gazetted, and that, too, if copies of the Gazette are freely available. The time allowed to the public to petition the Supreme Court being very limited in respect of ordinary Bills, and none at all in the case of "urgent Bills", the citizen's right of challenge of proposed legislation is narrowly circumscribed.

In Sri Lanka judicial review of the validity of legislation is precluded after enactment. Hence it is imperative in the interests of participatory democracy that the legislative process be open not only to the Members of Parliament but also to as many citizens as possible, especially because Parliament is deemed to exercise the legislative power of the people, in whom sovereignty vests. Participation in the legislative process must necessarily be free, responsible and informed. But the legal constraints discussed hitherto are an impediment to informed discourse because public access to the relevant information is extremely limited and a potential plurality of sources is curbed by law.
Structural Constraints on the Information Process

The mass media of social communication in Sri Lanka are structured as follows:

(i) Press
(ii) Radio
(iii) Television
(iv) Cinema

(1) Newspapers

The newspaper enterprise which in this country began in 1832, developed rapidly from about the middle of the 19th century. According to the Department of National Archives, of nearly 1700 newspapers registered in the Island between 1832 and the end of 1977 the largest number have been Sinhala journals, some 950. The Tamil newspapers were little over 400 and the English newspapers approximately 320. But at the end of 1977 there were 258 registered newspaper titles, but only 229 were being published. Of that number 156 were in Sinhala, 43 in Tamil and 27 in English. There were seven dailies in each of the languages and 52 weeklies, the largest number in Sinhala (30).

An encouraging development was that 100 new titles were registered between February 1973 and December 1977. Of them about 30 catered to occupational interests. An innovation was the publication of 26 local newspapers catering to readers of particular towns or villages between the years 1975 and 1977. Several of them were Left-oriented and some of the journals have ceased to exist. In general, newspapers that have survived longest are those published either by publishing companies or special institutions.

At present there are four dailies each in English, Sinhala and Tamil. The English weeklies are seven in number, Sinhala 25 and Tamil 5. In addition, there are over 50 periodicals in the three languages and each is devoted to a special interest group.
Of the total number of dailies (12) and weeklies (37) the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. publish 18, Independent Newspapers Ltd. 8, Upali Newspapers Ltd. 7, Express Newspapers (Ceylon) Ltd. 4 and Wijaya Publications Ltd. 5. The last-named publishes only weeklies.

Thus the plurality of newspapers (dailies and weeklies) is published by the ANCL Ltd. which since 1973 has been State-managed. The Times of Ceylon Group which used to publish English and Sinhala dailies and weeklies became a Government-owned Business Undertaking in August 1977 and is now no longer in existence, having been obliged to close down mainly for lack of financial viability.

It will be seen that between the end of 1977 and the present day the number of dailies in each of the three languages has dropped from seven to four and the number of weeklies has declined from 52 to 37. Thus there has been a diminishing plurality and diversity of newspapers, both as sources and outlets of information.

However, the ANCL Ltd. maintains a position of dominance because it publishes more newspapers than any other single group. Being a State-run undertaking has both advantages and disadvantages as a newspaper enterprise and as a means of social communication. The constraints are not only structural, deriving from ownership and management, but also functional in that the professional communicators are subject to the policy directives of the Government of the day and could be subject also to various pressures in their day-to-day work. The officialisation of news could be more easily effected in the State-run press than in the private sector of the press. The privately-owned newspapers are also under constraints, though of a different kind. They too, are policy-oriented, but what is significant is that within a single newspaper group there seems to be a plural policy, depending on the particular language and socio-cultural readership. This is strikingly evident in the English and Sinhala newspapers of Upali Newspapers Ltd.
(ii) Radio

Radio has been a State monopoly in this country since its inception in 1925. The constraints it was subject to were neither significantly reduced nor radically changed by its conversion to the Broadcasting Corporation in 1967. However, what is significant is its contribution to the development of the information process in terms of reach and access. In 1967, there were roughly 200,000 radios. In five years the number increased to 479,638. Five years later (1977) it had risen to 550,000. In 1984 there were 1,778,231 licensed radios, but in 1985 the number had dropped to 1,268,321. The broadcasting services have expanded, the transmitting hours per week have increased considerably and there are educational broadcasts for school children and teachers. Seven new transmitting stations and four regional stations including Mahaweli Community Radio are aspects of the state radio attempting to provide increased public access to the use of the medium. Further, the rural-urban imbalance in the provision of information, educational and recreational services via the media of social communication is being sought to be reduced.

Radio now has an islandwide reach. It is accessible to low-income groups and rural inhabitants, too, and reception is not constrained by the absence of electricity. It broadcasts daily in the three languages and for much longer than TV and its plural character is enhanced in that its programmes seek to cater to the different ethnic, religious and cultural groups, too. In addition the local component of the content of broadcasting far exceeds that of TV.

(iii) Television

Television is the newest of the mass media in Sri Lanka, a limited television service (ITN) having begun in 1979 and the State-run Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation having been established in 1982. Until last year nearly 84 per cent of the country was served by Rupavahini, but now the whole island is covered by the TV network. The number of licensed TV receivers which in 1980 was 40,000 is now estimated by Rupavahini to be 250,000. On the basis of five viewers to a set, Rupavahini estimates that about 1,250,000 people watch television daily. On the basis of five persons to a radio it could be concluded that nearly 6 million persons listen to the radio daily.
But if the communication process is to be optimised in the public interest, both radio and television must function in a complementary manner. This could be achieved without much difficulty because both media are State monopolies and co-ordination of their functioning should be easier. The absence of a clearly-articulated information policy and a media policy contributes to each medium developing independent of the others.

The different media — press, radio, television and cinema — individually and collectively have the potential for enriching the quality of human life by helping to stimulate the individual's faculties of sight, sound, speech, thought, imagination and emotion, thereby deepening social awareness, enhancing sensibility, fostering creativity and contributing to the full flowering of one's personality.

Rupavahini deserves to be commended for introducing a type of programme which contributes to strengthening the plural character of the social community. While the press and radio communicate in separate language "channels" Rupavahini has introduced common programmes which serve to expose viewers to the culture of other groups. TV being primarily a visual medium, lends itself vividly to the depiction and appreciation of the country's plurality.

The structural and functional constraints of a State-run institution are, however, evident in some of the programmes. TV has a rich potential for people's participation expressive of their needs and aspirations as well as their cultural creativity. But the evident need for commercial sponsorship or support could affect the content and quality of television programmes.

(iv) Cinema

Cinema now appears to be the Cinderella of the media in Sri Lanka, mainly owing to the popularity of television. Nevertheless, the official figure of 3,440 cinema halls in 1985 suggests they are still in use although audiences may be depleted. It is for the State Film Corporation to devise ways and means of developing cinema as a medium complementary to radio and television. In particular, there is much scope for the development of children's cinema, which is an urgent need.
Sociology of News

As in other countries, so in Sri Lanka, news is a social phenomenon as a source of information. But an analysis of the sociology of news reveals that the social structure is a major influence on the content of the formal purveyors of news—the media. The need to know is a consequence of human desire and is therefore a universally shared experience. But the content of news reflects the influence of a hierarchically structured society. Those who enjoy high visibility in news content are invariably those who rank high in the social hierarchy. When the poor and the marginalised make news it is invariably because of their aberrant behaviour or criminal activity. Therefore, as Professor Bernard Roshco of the University of Chicago contends in his book, Newsmaking, social structure influences communicability. The rich and the powerful and the other social elites are either the main sources of news or the subject of news. Hence, they are assiduously cultivated by professional communicators because what they say and do is presumed to be newsworthy.

But news as a social phenomenon must reflect life as it is, including both plurality and diversity. To report life is to report not the ideal, but the actual. Unfortunately, much of the media's concern with news and information is event-oriented, not process-oriented. The more obtrusive the event the greater its currency. Such an approach ignores people as sources of news and information and as communicators.

Most Asian societies are basically oral societies in that the communication networks are not exclusively or overwhelmingly the formal information networks, namely the media, but interpersonal relationships such as face-to-face conversation, gossip and rumour. Even where the formal media are depended upon as sources of news or information, the dissemination of such garnered material is through an oral process.
In Sri Lanka, about 78 per cent of the population is rural including the estate sector. But there is increasing physical mobility of the rural population as well as the suburban inhabitants. Daily there is movement of rural dwellers into urban areas for occupational reasons. Such movement is invariably accompanied by an interchange of news and information and the transmission of opinions, values and attitudes. Thus ordinary people, and neither professional communicators nor the socially visible elites act as sources and outlets. This communication process is marked by both plurality and diversity.

Knowledge Transmission Largely Monolingual

In the early section of this paper reference was made to the plural character of Sri Lanka's population. But among the major impediments to communication across group identities and the creation of a sense of national identity is the present structure of the formal school system.

According to the Census of Population of 1981, roughly 32.5 per cent of the population was between the ages of 5 and 19 years. The majority of them would have been participants in the formal school system, the older among them being in tertiary education. The official data for 1985 give the number of pupils attending school as 3,638,257. The number of government schools was 9,634 and of other schools including pirivenas, estate schools and private schools was 417. Of the total of 10,051 schools only some 130 schools used more than one language as the medium of instruction. The rest were monolingual schools. About 95 per cent of the Sinhala-medium and Tamil-medium schools were also mono-ethnic. It is very likely that the teachers in these schools were also mono-ethnic. In these circumstances, there is very little cross-cultural communication and the transmission of knowledge, values and attitudes takes place within linguistic and ethnic ghettoes. For the most part they could also be religious ghettoes. In the sphere of education, therefore, neither the plurality nor the diversity of Sri Lankan society is brought home to the child through the communication process. This is a very serious problem that merits the attention not only of educationists and policy-makers but also of professional communicators. Cross-cultural communication makes for conviviality, and the experience of living together must begin in the school.