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The Impact Of Mass Media On Sri Lankan Villages
And The Changing Face Of The Media Scene

By

Sunanda Mahendara
Islamabad, Pakistan, March 28 - 30, 1983.

The impact of Mass Media in Sri Lankan villages and the changing phase of the
media scene (some observations deduced from a media survey conducted in
three Sri Lankan villages, Puleliya, Kahapativilagama and Tampagalla).

A paper prepared by,
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Introduction.
The three main Mass Media agencies operating in Sri Lanka are: the press, which has
a history of about 100 years, the Broadcasting services with a history of about fifty-seven
years and Cinema with a history of thirty-five years. The Television services, which are newly formed and introduced in Sri Lanka about one-and-a-half years ago is still in its formative stages gradually developing as a powerful visual medium. At the outset it must be emphasised that I am not in a position to state anything via any serious research on the subject of Television in Sri Lanka as I have not conducted any communication surveys that deserve mention. Despite this, we have gauged the size of the present Television audience during the course of one of our island-wide communication surveys.

Due to the rest of the material that goes into the paper are based on three main communication surveys conducted through the Department of Mass Communication.

In one of our island-wide radio listenership surveys we had the opportunity of gathering data on the following areas: a) demographic details pertaining to the Sri Lankan radio listener; b) the peak listening times and radio channel preferences; c) programme preferences via channels and types; d) the index of programme preference the likes and dislikes of programmes etc; e) technical issues pertaining to the listener in various parts of the country, the channel distortions, interferences, sound fluctuations etc; f) programme planning on the part of the listener and information preference on various programmes newly introduced etc; g) the impact of radio listening on the day-to-day life, attitudes and opinion formation etc.
These projects also helped us to gauge the preferences and information gatherings from other media as well and allowed us to understand the present state of mass media operation in Sri Lanka, especially at the grass-roots level.

Broadcasting scene

Over a period of fifty-five years broadcasting in Sri Lanka has developed with two major regional broadcasting services and a UNESCO-sponsored Community Radio service affiliated to one of the regional stations. Of the major functions of radio broadcasting in Sri Lanka is that it has become unique medium in the absence of private broadcasting agencies. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is a government body challenged by any other agency. As the researcher and administrator Anura Gunasekara, one of the few who had actively conducted a survey into various areas of mass media in the country, points out: Still 1966 broadcasting in Sri Lanka was a function of a Government department. In 1966, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation was constituted by an act of Parliament and began to function within the framework of a public corporation. The main reason for setting up a public corporation for broadcasting was to free broadcasting from the shackles of financial and administrative regulations that would apply invariably as long as it remained within the framework of a government department. As a public corporation it was believed that the broadcasting corporation would have the freedom of a commercial enterprise and the power and backing of a government ministry. Whether the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation lived up to these expectations is debatable.

The final verdict of Gunasekara has a meaningful tone. It seems that the status given to the Broadcasting Corporation has not been achieved from the point of view of the radio output over the years. The listening masses seem to believe that there should be a drastic change in the programme output. The listener preferences show that they are being constantly disappointed by the broadcasting corporation. Several farmers in the area of Puleliya told me that they not being helped by the radio broadcasts. By 'help' what they meant was quite important. There are several channels declared as 'farmer broadcasts'. But they do not serve any purpose for these channels as such. Thus the ideology of rural broadcasting needs reassessment.
The peak listenning hours are found in the early morning transmissions, (ie. from 5.30 a.m to 8.00 a.m) and the late night transmissions, (ie. from 9.00 p.m. to 11.00 p.m).

The following are the types of programmes preferred by listeners of the Sinhala services (which is the main listening channel), in order of preference:

1. Music 83.75%
2. Plays and short stories, 64.62%
3. Quiz programmes, 50.27%
4. News, News programmes and current affairs, 46.27%
5. Religious programmes 64.62%
6. Educational, Development and Agriculture, 50.27%
7. Sports 47.28%
8. Children's and Women's 46.28%
9. Features and Poetry 46.25%
10. Commercials and announcements 39.97%

It would be interesting to note here the radio broadcasting channels preferred by the listeners in Sri Lanka. Following is the order of preference found by me.

1. Sinhala channel two, is designed for commercial broadcasting, where the clients who so desire have the option of selecting the type of programmes they intend to use. These programmes include mainly serialised plays bearing characters drawn from the remote village life and set in villages, light musical programmes, quiz programmes etc.

2. Sinhala Channel one, this channel is also known by the term National service, and designed to suit a more sophisticated listener. But it must be noted that the output is more or less similar in nature and the same type of programme producer handles the material that go into the channel. The average listener deems this channel one as a serious service catered to the educated masses.

3. Rajarata savaya - a provincial broadcasting station situated in North Central Province, Anuradhapura, the first capital in Sri Lanka.

4. Ruhunu savaya - a provincial broadcasting station situated down South in Watara.
5. Educational service (Sinhala) - a channel operating from the main station in Colombo and broadcasts programmes in three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English.

6. Sinhala Channel three, this channel, which was mainly meant for sports programmes, was closed down recently.

7. English channel two - like the channel two Sinhala this channel was designed for commercial broadcasts in English. This channel too was closed down recently, and affiliated to the channel one, English.

8. Tamil channel two. This channel, like the channel two Sinhala and English, was designed for commercial broadcasts in the Tamil language. It is notable that this channel is preferred to by the listeners in Jaffna in Northern part of Sri Lanka and South India.

9. English channel One, like the channel one Sinhala, this channel was designed to cater to more sophisticated audiences listening in English language.

10. Tamil Channel One, like the channel one Sinhala and channel one English this channel is designed to cater to listeners predominantly listening to more sophisticated programmes in Tamil language.

11. Educational Service Tamil.

12. Muslim Service, a service that is more or less affiliated to the Sinhala channel one, and designed to address the Muslim listeners in Sri Lanka, especially the religious programmes.

It is necessary to note that the traditional format of the radio broadcasting in Sri Lanka has undergone during the last fifteen years (1978 -1993). The introduction of cassette tapes, manufactured by the private dealers, has up to a point disturbed the traditional pattern of musical output, which played a vital part in the national life of the country. In fact it is important to say that the music output on the part of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is challenged with the advent of the cassette tapes. In one of our findings it was revealed that people buy radio sets in order to playback cassette tapes and record their choice of music from the transmissions on to empty cassette. I presume that it is important to go into - an in-depth study of this aspect without sweeping / sweeping statements on the actual situation.
Radio and cassette players

It is necessary to note that the traditional mode of listening to radio, especially in the rural areas of Sri Lanka underwent a drastic change towards the end of the seventies. The local listeners who used to listen to the main radio output of broadcasting programmes from the main station in Colombo and the two regional stations had the added advantage of obtaining cassette players. We have seen that the use of cassettes have had a very significant impact on the radio listening in the country. Instead of listening to the programme output of the above stations, the listener has his own way of listening to music and other features readily available in the market. The broadcasting corporation had over the years tried their best to define the term 'good' music as against the 'pop' music available and sometimes banned by the board of directors. This was especially observed during the seventies when the Director-General himself sat on judgement on some of the music output of the broadcasting Corporation. He had a record player and listened to all the records and cassettes manufactured in the country. The introduction of 'good' music and other programmes was not quite felt on the listening masses. Thus it is sufficient to mention here that the coming of the 'cassette culture' made a stir in the climate of listening. On one hand the radio broadcasts in the country are challenged with the advent of cassettes into the country. On the other hand, the cassette production has brought about a change in the format of the existing radio broadcasting patterns in the country. Recently the board of directors of the Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation rejected a certain popular serialised radio play. A private company requested the writer concerned to design the same material for a cassette (or a series of cassettes). This particular cassette containing a sensational play is quite popular now. It is so observed that some of the broadcasting material rejected goes into many cassettes. This is true especially of music, an area which is constantly a debatable subject in the country. The scholars in music say that no proper place is given to our indigenous music or the traditional music of the country. The radio planners on the other hand say that the output of traditional music is so spread that the radio listeners are constantly worried. So the debate goes on.
In our surveys we have found that cassette users have preferred to use their private tapes for entertainment purposes as they believe that the radio output is hardly sufficient for their needs. For instance, the Sri Lanka private vehicles used for commuter transport are equipped with a small cassette player-cum-radio. Most of the time the drivers and the conductors use their private cassette. In Sri Lanka there is one in each five of the private vehicles a cassette player of this sort. In the village of Puleliya I have found the use of the radio cum cassette is widely spread. Out of a number of 420 respondents interviewed, 45 percent said that they listened either into the channel of the local radio services, which is predominantly a commercial broadcast, and 30 percent to the local channel which is predominantly the national services. Out of the total number of respondents interviewed 60 percent possessed radio cum cassette players. In one of the surveys conducted in the year 1980, at the local airport it was found that out of a group of four who comes to the country either from the Middle East or from any other part of the world one brings a cassette cum radio with him. This number has gradually decreased in the year 1983 as the purchasing of these cassette cum radio sets was found possible in the duty free complex within the country. But still it is found that the number of users of cassette sets is increasing and the output of the number of cassette is also in the increase. My present observation is that in a traditional village like Puleliya in the region of North Central Province, there is a cassette-infested cultural shock. A certain farmer told me that "a cassette is a very useful companion who helped him to keep himself awake during the night, in his little watch hut in the farmyard (hena)."

A certain lorry driver told one of our researchers that "the modern cassettes with jazzy type of songs is a very useful companion especially when he drives his lorry in the night. When the entire world is fast asleep, he kept alive because of the calibre of songs in the cassette!"

The same researcher who wrote a dissertation points out that several hotel keepers have formed the habit of supplying cassettes to lorry and bus drivers in order to attract their attention to their business. When the bus drivers stop near one of these hotels the passengers have to take their meals and that brings
lot of money. Thus it is seen that supplying a cassette tape free of charge is an investment for hotel keepers. There are twenty major cassette manufacturers in Sri Lanka. Their major function is to get the most popular singers and get their songs cassette and make them available in the market. These cassette are advertised through radio and through popular Sunday newspapers.

Several researchers have analysed the content of these cassettes. It is found that some of them are quite low brow in nature. They are branded as local pop songs catered for the needs of those who dislike the radio music output. Cassette industry is a money spinning business in Sri Lanka. It is observed that a certain business man who was the pioneer of the cassette industry in Sri Lanka became a very rich man who went into the film industry as well. These business men who invest money in getting the pop songs cassette, also have employed the best of singers in the country and disallow them to go earn from other sources. They produce at least two cassettes a month. The number put into the market ranges from 3000 to 5000. Each cassette is priced at Rs 50 - 65 (The price fluctuates as the demand goes up).

It would be quite interesting to note how the listening to cassettes have lowered the cultural values in our society. This has created a steady decrease in the pattern of listening to radio music on the part of the youth in Sri Lanka. 55 percent of the youth who used to listen to good music from radio services broadcast in 1979 dropped steadily in the year 1982 as the habit formation via cassette players intensified. This is well indicated in our radio listenership survey of 1982. It was also observed that a galaxy of pop musicians were emerging with the advent of the cassette production. Some of the best artists utilised by the local radio services were absorbed into the cassette industry. It is also observed that in the 1982 listenership survey conducted island-wide, the emerging point is that though music is listened to there is a steady decrease in the listening habits and channel loyalties.

This factor could be seen intensified with the introduction of television in Sri Lanka. Perhaps in the traditional villages like Pulleliya, Kahapatvilagama and Tambagal, the villages known to be a's laboratory situations, the advent of television has caused an incredible change in the general media scene, and
Out of ten farmers living in the area of Puleliya in Anuradhapura, (NP of Sri Lanka), who have bought television sets recently, the reason for buying seems to be to watch the Sinhala film telecast once a week on Thursdays. Now, the Sinhala film that is projected is not made for television by a team of television artists, but is instead a film that has been in circulation sometime. The television service in Sri Lanka due to the fact that it is formed recently finds it difficult to make use of the medium to cater to all the needs of the viewers. As such, they have to depend entirely on some of the previous cinema which by all means does not come up to any watchable level. It is also important to understand that some of these films are so very bad that they should not be telecast at all. But the fact remains that it is a good way of earning money for the sustenance of the television medium. The critics of the television medium have time and again pointed out that some of the denatured Sinhala and Tamil films should not be shown. These films when shown to a larger audience will naturally have ill-effects which are commonly observable.

This is just one side of the story. The other side of the story is equally important. There is a steady decline in the average production of films in Sri Lanka today. Those who use to make at least good films once a year are grossly discouraged. According to the State Film Corporation sources, there is a 40 percent decline in Sinhala film production. With the advent of television in Sri Lankan villages, the evening habits have changed drastically especially on the day the Sinhala film is shown. Those who do not have a television set in the village go to a place where there is one. In one of the houses in the area of Ratnapura (the city famed for gems) I had the opportunity of seeing how people in the nearby houses flock to a well known house of a village elder to see television films. I asked them several questions pertaining to my study of viewing habits.

Two of the elders in the village told me that despite the fact that they cannot understand the language (i.e., English) they prefer to see some of the foreign films, containing fights and adventures. Another elder told me that he prefers to see animated cartoon films as they are 'quite funny.' Majority liked to watch the weekly Sinhala film. With the advent of television the habit of listening to radio especially during the night is gradually disappearing.
The impact of picture story

One of the most striking changes in the local media scene is the advent of the picture story or the chitra katha as it is commonly known, and the impact it had created especially on the minds of the young and the adolescent in Sri Lanka. It is observed that though there were several cartoon and comic strips appearing in the daily and weekly newspapers in the country, a significant change took place during the early seventies with the advent of high-powered offset printing machines. Some of the commonest picture stories on the lines of Captain Marvel, Superman, Batman and stories of cowboys and jungle girls came to be translated and adapted to suit local conditions, flooding the newstands. This trend still continues. Firstly, one observes the appearance of several picture-story weeklies which instantly caught the book market. The school girls and boys could buy a fourteen-page glossy picture-story paper for a low price of Rs. 1.50. As the demand increased the price went up to Rs. 2.50 - 3.00. One of the pioneer picture story papers titled, Sittara, as the editor of the paper points out, sold more than 80,000 copies a week. Later on as the competition drew closer with the appearance of other picture-story papers and magazines the number slowly decreased to about 50,000. I have found several picture-story clubs formed by young boys in remote villages. They collect a subscription fee to buy all the popular picture papers published weekly. When a particular member pays a subscription fee of about one rupee a month he gets the opportunity to read all the picture story papers. As the membership increases there is a tendency to buy more and more papers. I found one such picture-story club well formed in the village of Biyagama close to the University.

What is the type of reading material one finds in these picture stories? As I pointed out earlier, they are basically foreign stories of the type one sees printed in 'comics'. Quite apart from these models there are the local love stories, adventure stories, popular novels serialised in picture forms etc. (most of these stories are sentimental and banal and does not add any valuable significance to the readers' acquisition of knowledge. Out of the picture story papers published in Sri Lanka the following are the most popular.
Satuta, Sittara, Madura, Dasuna, Chitra mitra, Swarna, Suhada. On approaching the subject of the impact of the reading of picture stories on the part of the school children and adolescents, many a literary critic, teacher, educationist and social scientist have pointed out the ill effects and the imbalance that it has created in reading habits, and the disturbance in the day-to-day activities. (of the Buddhist sect)

A high-priest who disliked his novice reading picture-stories told me that 'one of these days this novice (samanera) will leave the robes and go home'.

An elderly parent who found his child deeply engrossed in the reading of picture story papers without giving any attention to his school work remarked: 'This boy will grow up to be an idiot, at the rate he is reading these trash!'. A certain mother told me that her little child who is about ten years old constantly troubles her to buy a weekly picture-story paper and that she finds it difficult to buy it. She told me that she is helping him to be a sinner by buying these papers. I asked her why she said so. Then she told me: 'I once read one of these papers for curiosity sake and found that it is packed with obscene scenes. We are not used to read such papers during our school days!'

A certain examiner of children's art at school level at an interview told me that 'most children have acquired the worst form of drawing tendencies by trying to imitate the picture-story papers. They have gone to the extent of drawing the picture of Buddha and Christ in the style one sees in sentimental picture-stories!' I asked a certain teacher of literature about his reactions. He said: 'There is a terrible impact on the children's thinking as a result of reading picture-story papers. They are so attracted towards reading these trash that they cannot be helped to read 'classics' and develop a genuine appreciation of creative works. Their essays are full of slang, one commonly sees in picture stories. In a certain survey conducted by the Ministry of Plan implementation following conclusions were announced:

1. Picture stories published Sri Lanka contain a lot of sentimental low brow reading material instantly produced by mediocrity artists and writers.

2. There are sentimental and banal drawings that will disturb a reader.

3. Most picture stories published do not add any significant contribution to traditional value patterns and social beliefs and acquisition of knowledge.
1. Most children and even adults have become addicts to picture story reading to the extent that their normal life styles have observably changed from good to bad.

2. Most parents find it difficult to save their children from the menace of reading picture-stories.

3. Picture stories are instantly produced by irresponsible media men whose sole intention is grabbing money from their readers. These contributors are neither creative in the strict sense of the word nor sensitive to local realities.

4. Picture-story messages will not help build a better development communication.

5. Picture-story reading habit will detract a person from reading any serious reading material. It also takes away their mind from supplementary reading available in the country.

6. Picture stories depict a wrong picture of local life and at times goes to the extent of distorting the socio-cultural patterns, socio-religious traits etc.

7. The strength of the picture-story medium if properly and scientifically handled should help an individual to his betterment and the dissemination of a good development message creatively.

It is also noted that most picture stories that became quite popular in Sri Lankan newspapers were made into films. But the trend did not last too long. Some how the cine-audiences did not like most of those films and did not receive equally well in the case of the print medium.

Newspaper scene

Two of our media surveys show us that reading newspaper at the village level is gradually decreasing. In the village Puleliya I found that there are only 01% of people reading newspapers. There are several significant reasons attached to this. Though there is a certain degree of literacy prevalent in our country the availability of good reading material is one factor. Analysing the content of our local newspapers one will observe that there is more governmental news printed and there is a severe reluctance on the part of the reader to read them. On the other hand the newspapers lack 'insight' stories and investigative reporting.

Out of the four main newspapers in Sri Lanka, two are government owned media agencies. (Lake House, Times of Ceylon, Davasa group of newspapers or the
Independent Newspaper Company and Upala Newspaper group are the four major media agencies. Our surveys show that there is a steady decrease in the circulation of the publications of the two governmental groups, i.e., Lake House and Times of Ceylon. Silumina, the Sunday Sinhala newspaper used to be one of the leading important publications of Lake House. Since the government takeover, it has gradually lost its calibre. A certain Buddhist intellectual in an interview told me:

"Silumina was a real storehouse of knowledge during those good old days. Now it has become a warehouse for government publicity!" A social scientist once told me that, 'Lake House papers are politically biased.' I interviewed several working journalists attached to the group. Some of the senior editors told me that 'they are forced to do a job of work which brings no real satisfaction.'

These papers at the turn of the century catered to an intelligentsia that in turn became opinion leaders both at the village level and at the more urbanised levels of our country. One observes that the two private groups supply more stimulating and resourceful reading matter than the government-owned papers. Some of the topics covered by these private groups are received well by the readers as they generally see the 'other side of the story' (the story that is not published in the government papers).

Reading of political newspapers is a significant trend in Sri Lanka. During the time of the presidential election, the Communist-oriented daily titled, 'ATTA' (Truth) was the largest circulating newspaper available in the newsstands. One of the major factors was the powerful editorial it carried. Followed by this, there appeared several creative and humorous pieces and information that was readily received by masses. This also in a way gave way to a strong 'acid' writing which resulted in the imposing of a ban on this particular paper. The acquisition of political knowledge at the grass roots level is one of the most important factors. I have observed that many a villager who dislikes himself to be a 'Communist' acquired the habit of reading this particular paper in order to gain knowledge about the 'actual situation' in the country. Buddhist intellectuals who dislike Communist ideology were seen reading ATTA, and received it as their unofficial opinion leader.
A bleak newspaper scene in Sri Lanka has given way to the publication of a galaxy of little magazines in the forms of bulletins, newsletters, tabloid papers, mini magazines in the forms of folders. On analysing these one finds that these publications are a welcome variant to the existing type attempting to air the 'other view' or the 'anti establishment view' which is directly opposed to the views held by the government-oriented newspapers. I have tried to analyse the content of quite a few of these publications. (These papers include such titles as, Katapata, Mavatha, Pihiya, Arbuda, Kolaya, Patrikava, etc)

Most of these publications one finds a certain degree of new thought enveloped in the traditional garb. To give an example I have found that many Sinhala poet who wants to express an experience of a social injustice would write in the traditional metrical pattern seen in the age-old ballads of the days of the Kandyan period of Sinhala literature. These metrical poems are titled 'Kavikolaya'.

The kavi kolaya type of modern expression has become quite popular among the younger generation of poets. These publications are printed and circulated among a limited circle of readers and as such will not have any impact on masses. But yet the fact remains that they are a challenge to the existing pattern of conventional media structure. Through these publications the writers clamour for a better media climate, an intelligent message and impartial information distribution.

Conclusion

Radio though listened to by the majority of masses in the country has certainly not catered to the real needs of the people, especially in the field of knowledge acquisition. The broadcasters and programme producers in the country have not gone through correct training processes and are devoid of the mass conscience of the country. The radio as a medium is undergoing challenges easily understood, and need to be understood at the planning levels.

Newspaper world too has faced lot of challenges especially due to the limitations it has in structure. As I have pointed out the two government-owned newspaper groups have over the years become mere instruments in channelising all government messages without much thought given to creative communication. People believe that the newspapers which have sprung up as opposed to these established pattern should be accepted as national newspapers. A reorientation in newspaper out
put is anticipated. The view that 'old newspapers were really good and the modern newspapers are bad' remain to be assessed. The opinion leaders at the grass roots level believe that modern day newspapers do not cater to their needs.

The technological advancement observable via such equipment as offset-printing machines, had not kept a lively climate for the masses; instead it had impaired the sensitive areas of life. Two good examples are the advent of cassettes and picture-stories. Though television service is in its infancy yet good planning for the future is anticipated. With a high rate of literacy prevailing in the country the print medium should be elevated from its present situation catering to the needs of the people. The media men, media planners and social scientists in Sri Lanka should reassess their standpoint in respect of the dissemination of information to the masses.

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