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Problems Of News Gathering And News Dissemination

By

Manik de Silva
MEDIA WORKSHOP ON COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

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PROBLEMS OF NEWS GATHERING AND NEWS DISSEMINATION

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PROBLEMS OF NEWS GATHERING AND DISSEMINATION

By Manik de Silva

Although Sri Lanka has a well established news industry with the national dailies published by three companies penetrating into virtually every nook and corner of the country, the state-owned radio reaching an estimated 90 per cent of the homes countrywide and television which, though relatively new (Rupavahini celebrated its fifth birthday this year), proliferating very rapidly, the country is not without its problems of news gathering. This paper, though by no means comprehensive, attempts to express some thoughts on the problems and possible solutions.

Some of the obvious problems of news gathering that all media in the country faces are:

Uneven quality of news staff;

The lack of adequate financial incentives to attract the best and the brightest into journalism;

The various constraints placed in the way of news gathering both in the state and private sectors by bureaucrats and managers who believe that 'no news is good news';

The lack of a reliable communication system;

Inadequacy of language skills among many journalists, particularly where English is concerned;

A pre-occupation by most practicing journalists with stories from the state sector (government departments, corporations etc.) and institutions like parliament, the courts and political parties to the detriment of news from other areas including business and human interest;

A reluctance on the part of many journalists to dig into a story and investigate it thoroughly, with too many reporters often content with making a couple of telephone calls and satisfied with the incomplete information gathered thereby;

The high cost of transport and the general reluctance of most reporters to go where the stories are unless a company car is provided;

Limitations placed by the political orientation of different newspapers shutting out information from parties and groups that consider such media as hostile;

And the lack of a sophisticated information dissemination system in most public and private sector institutions.

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Pay and the quality of journalists in terms of skill and motivation

Journalism in Sri Lanka has not been a very well paid profession though in recent years there has been a significant improvement in terms and conditions of employment. The better pay and perks have largely been the preserve of full-time journalists, generally working from the Colombo headquarters of the media.

The provincial correspondents, employed as "stringers" on piece-rate payments, still earn very little. A very good story from a province, for example, may pay Rs.30 which is slightly more than one US dollar. While a few provincial correspondents earn over Rs.2,000 a month as a result of covering news rich areas, or because of a very hard work, the majority earn much less.

In recent years some university graduates have sought careers in journalism. Lake House, under the stewardship of Mr. Esmond Wickremesinghe, tried about 21 years ago to generally restrict recruitment into journalistic positions of graduates only but this did not work out quite the way he wanted. The best talent from the universities were not attracted by the salaries and many non-graduates with inquiring minds and a flair for writing did drift into positions in the editorial departments of Lake House and made good.

It may be a sweeping generalisation, but there is more than a substratum of fact that many competent journalists remained in the profession in Sri Lanka because of what is often referred to in newspapering as a "private practice". They were able to write for foreign publications and substantially supplement their incomes. That made them sufficiently economically viable not to look for more remunerative employment elsewhere.

Today conditions have improved considerably. Yet journalism cannot be considered a well paid profession except at the higher positions. The number of foreign "strings" available too have grown but these generally tend to be won by the more senior and experienced professionals.

Constraints on news gathering placed by bureaucrats and managers

These, sadly, are too many. Many institutions impose blanket silence requirements on their staff and very few, if any, have official spokesmen (or women) to speak on their behalf in the event of an inquiry. Many public servants can cite a circular or an administrative order saying that they are not permitted to give information to the press or "ask the ministry".

The questions that tend to be asked are matters of public importance and the public have a right to know the answers. But too many public servants either think otherwise or have been required to present a blank wall of silence to the press by some administrative fiat. There are, happily, many exceptions. Some officials do co-operate with the press and are helpful. But too many are un-cooperative. Also, many journalists do not know enough of the subject they are investigating to ask the right penetrating questions and get the information that would both improve and brighten their stories.

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This is true not only of the public sector. The private sector in Sri Lanka has had less experience with the press than their public sector counterparts and are often difficult to deal with. Businessmen don't like to discuss turnover and profits, perhaps because they fear the tax man! They think competitors will get vital commercial information if they talk too freely. They welcome the press and exposure largely for commercial reasons or personal publicity. But here again it must be said that there are exceptions and the Sri Lanka media are venturing out into business news much more than they ever did before.

The communication system

The phone system in the country is not the best, though it has been improving significantly in recent years. Many eyebrows would go up at this statement, but as far as the media is concerned, the availability of direct dialling to many outstations which used to be reachable under a painfully slow trunk exchange in the past is a great blessing. Certainly the phones do go out of order and in many newsrooms a large number of reporters have to share too few direct lines. This is a constraint.

Where correspondents are concerned, when they phone in a story they are too often treated cavalierly by whoever answers the phone. There is no realisation in Colombo that a correspondent may have cooled his heels for an hour or more at a post office to get a connection and then when he eventually gets through is told: "I can't take it down. Send a telegram".

A senior newsman who is now retired used to retail a story of a visit to the headquarters of a big wire service which he served as its Colombo stringer. "I think they treat my copy the way I treat the Wattala correspondent's", he chortled. The story, though apocryphal, has its lessons.

An advantage that the big newspaper publishers have is that their correspondents can send written 'copy' back to the publishing office by circulation van if the story can hold 24 hours or so. Telegrams are also used though it is today a communication method of diminishing importance.

Language skills

The English media, particularly, is confronted with this problem. As in all fields activity in the country, the news media which needs people with writing skills, has suffered from the deterioration of the standards of English in the country. Where Sinhala and Tamil writers are concerned, this is not as serious a problem because writing talent abounds. But it is often necessary to be able to speak and understand English fluently both for reading and sharpening journalistic skills as well as for gathering information.

It may be arguably said that the English language is the biggest single vested interest in the country today. Certainly it is one of the most powerful passports to privilege. Many of the important speeches in parliament are made in English and it is an open secret that cabinet discussions are in English. So are the more important meetings and conferences both in the public and private sector. The supreme court does much of its work in English as do many of the other courts. The opinion leaders are more comfortable in English and sad, but true, the reporter who asks his questions in English too often gets a better reception and better answers than the journalist who talks in Sinhala.
or Tamil only. Therefore a lack of English is a constraint in news gathering.

There have been reporters from the Sinhala papers who’d prefer to identify themselves as being from "Lake House" or the "Times" rather than say that they belonged to "Dinamina" or the "Lankadeepa". That is because they felt, and often rightly, that they would be treated better if they pretend they are not from the Sinhala papers. Although the English papers have smaller circulations than their Sinhalese counterparts, the "Daily News" alone, for example, earns half of Lake House’s revenues. The consumers are largely English speaking and that drums up advertising revenues. Opinion leaders are English speakers. A journalist without good English is therefore handicapped even if he does not work for an English newspaper or other medium.

Preoccupation with "Establishment" news

There is too much focus in the Sri Lanka media today on news relating to government departments, state-owned corporations and the rest of the "Establishment" like the courts, parliament, political parties, etc. The media in this country have for too long considered the news to relate almost exclusively to these institutions and have largely ignored the stories crying to be written outside this holy grail. A veteran and highly respected public figure in this country once told this writer that every single human being had a first class original story and a journalist's skill was to find it!

The possibilities are boundless and with imagination and persistence a great deal can be achieved. Tarzie Vittachi, a name familiar to most Lankans, has written and lectured a great deal about reporting processes rather than events. This is an area that deserves a lot of attention. A single diarrhoea epidemic would make the frontpages but dedicated work over a period of years to prevent such an epidemic wins little attention. The "baby farms" today are big news. But how much attention have the media paid to the problems of unwed mothers? What happens to illegitimate children who have survived a horrible death in some lavatory pit or other?

There are hundreds and thousands of stories outside the traditional news beats that are waiting to be written. As more and more of those appear in print (or on the air tele-waves), the multiplier effect will certainly work and many good stories would undoubtedly be produced.

Lack of investigative reporting

Too many reporters of today are satisfied with the superficial story. There isn’t enough digging, finding the facts, answering all the questions that will arise in the reader’s mind, presenting the picture as totally as possible. A couple of telephone calls, 15 minutes at the typewriter and the day’s work is too often done. The gatekeepers, as the modern jargon has it, are partly at fault for letting these stories in. Any news editor looking desperately for some usable stories for his frontpage as the deadline approaches is compelled to make do with what his reporters have produced. Demanding supervisors, less willing to let half-baked stories pass their desks and with the time and the patience to guide and brief reporters on the angles

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they should explore will help improve both the stories as well as the quality of the journalists who write them.

Reporters working public interest stories sometimes have to contend with interests at risk if an expose is published. The officials responsible for failing to ensure that a mosquito breeding drain was cleaned or the importer of a contaminated milkpowder consignment will want to cover his tracks. Libel laws too can be a problem but editors and companies may sometimes be willing to risk expensive litigation if the public interest demands it. Very high costs and the vexing delays of the law are certainly factors that might influence decisions on whether to carry a story that can lead to a defamation suit.

The cost of transport

Mobility is most important for a journalist. Few in the profession can afford a car. A motorbike is a better bet and this writer, who has spent hours at bus stands waiting for buses that were slow in coming, found that a scooter was a tremendous efficiency improver. With the cost of vehicles and fuel what it is, publishers do keep a rein on the use of company vehicles and the lack of adequate mobility is a serious constraint in news gathering. The lack of transport often make many reporters try to do on the phone what they can do much better by calling personally.

Some of the publishing companies help journalistic staff with loans, etc. to get themselves vehicles but whether these facilities percolate down to where they are most needed is a moot point. And many reporters would find an instalment on a car or a motorbike too heavy to bear on what they earn.

Political problems

In Sri Lanka, Lake House which dominates the print media scene is government controlled. The radio and television are state-owned. There are three privately owned publishing companies with national circulations and a fourth, which already has string of successful periodicals, is preparing to launch a newspaper. There is a very vigorous political press and the Communist Party's "Aththa", demonstrated during the October 1982 presidential election that it had the capacity to achieve a much large circulation than it normally attains. But the political papers generally command modest circulations.

The attitudes of the political parties to various newspapers differ. The SLFP which led the United Front coalition responsible for the Lake House takeover has complained often about the treatment it receives at the hands of the Lake House today. The party is conveniently silent about how its opponents were treated in the days it ran Lake House. But the fact remains that Lake House reporters have to contend with a hot and cold approach in getting SLFP stories. Sometimes the party wishes its statements published by Lake House and would issue such statements to the papers of the group; at other times it may not.

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SLFP personalities have good relations with some Lake House journalists and generally both sides try to adopt a pragmatic approach to keep the news flowing. Of course, Lake House may not get an SLFP scoop and the party may not get the treatment it would wish for a statement it has issued to ANCL.

A skilled and fair reporter can always help maintain the balance. Some may argue that the treatment of the story is outside the reporter's hands. This is partly true. But he or she can influence the treatment. The true professional will be nobody's political hack and in the print media certainly, a balanced approach by both sides can mitigate problems that are inherent.

It is useful to remember that 1956 happened with the media solidly backing the UNP. The United Front swept the 1970 general elections despite an unsympathetic press and the nationalisation of Lake House and its control in the hands of the SLFP did not prevent its rout in 1977.

Deficiencies in information system in the public and private sectors.

The existing information system in the public sector is uneven and is almost non-existent in the private sector.

Most ministries have an information department official posted as a press officer and their performances are uneven, largely dependent on the energy and enthusiasm of the individual press officer. An increasing realisation of the importance of information services has resulted in recent years of upgrading and improving such services. The Prime Minister, notably, and some of the other ministries run competent press offices, thanks largely to a willingness to expend substantial resources on these facilities. Elsewhere both the lack of funds and interest result in a sorry performance and difficulties for the media dependent on such news sources. Some state owned corporations too have their press or information officers and their performances, like in many government departments and ministries, is variable.

The private sector in Sri Lanka has not had a tradition of building information dissemination systems and often even big companies where a PRO can double as a press officer, the necessary institutions do not exist. Both the media and the companies themselves suffer from this deficiency as the media find it difficult to get information that would interest it and the company misses opportunities of usefully publicising itself.

Problems of news dissemination

Having dwelt at some length on some of the problems of news gathering in Sri Lanka, it is appropriate to devote at least this penultimate paragraph to the problems of dissemination of news. This country is fortunate that its literacy rate has long been a cause for great pride and today there are very few young people who are illiterate. The level of literacy and the comparative compactness of the island makes it possible to deliver the news reasonably conveniently. The radio has today reached almost every home. Television receivers are widely used.

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even in areas not supplied with electricity with viewers using car batteries as a power source. In this sense both the print and electronic media have no serious problems in reaching their readers/listeners/viewers. Once packaged, the delivery of the news is not difficult in Sri Lanka.

As I said in my introduction, this is not a complete view of the subject. I have merely expressed some thoughts. There are many more areas that deserve examination and discussion. I hope the seminar session at which this presentation is discussed will throw up many other problems and solutions.