

SRI LANKA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Sri Lanka

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SRI LANKA

AT A GLANCE

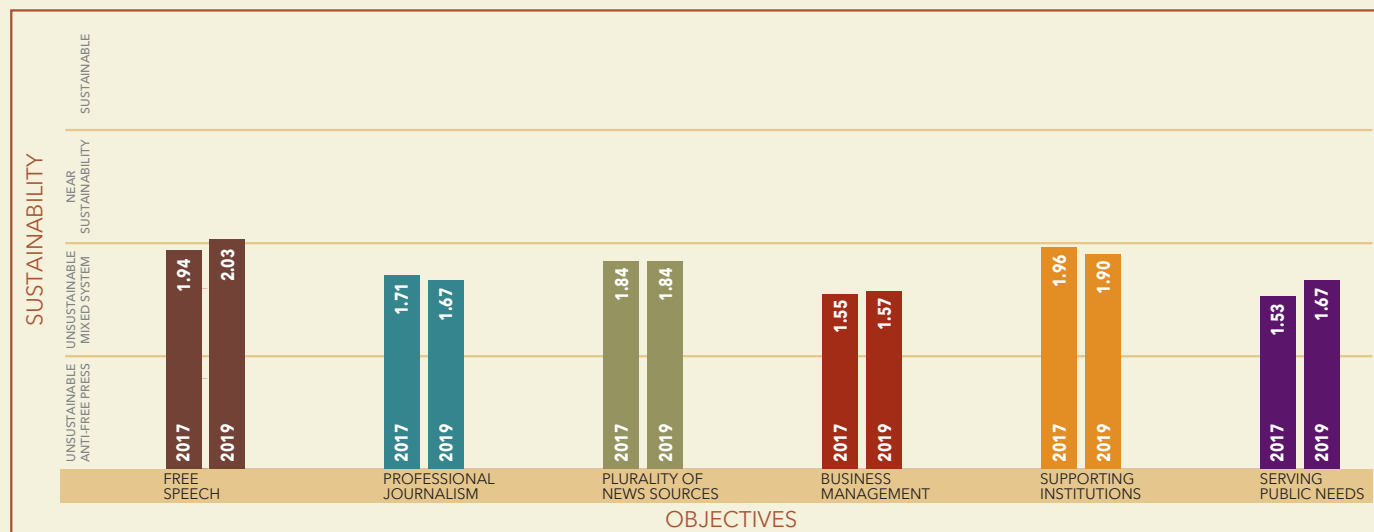
GENERAL

- **Population:** 21.67 million (Department of Census and Statistics, 2018)
- **Capital City:** Colombo
- **Ethnic Groups (% of population):** Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%, Sri Lankan Moor 9.3%, Indian Tamil 4.1%, Other 0.5% (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2018)
- **Religion (% of population):** Buddhist 70.1%, Hindu 12.6%, Muslim 9.7%, Roman Catholic 6.1%, Other Christian 1.3%, Other 0.05% (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2018)
- **Languages (% of population):** Sinhala (Official and National Language) 74%, Tamil (Official and National Language) 18%, Other 8% (est. CIA World Factbook, 2012)
- **GNI (2017 Market prices):** \$85 billion (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018)
- **Literacy rate (average):** 93.1% (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018)
- **President or top authority:** President Maithripala Sirisena (since January 9, 2015)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active media outlets:** print: 20 (daily), 50 (weekly) and 30 (monthly), radio stations: 50, television stations: 20 (Verite Research, Media and Owners Database, 2018)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** top five dailies: Lankadeepa (Sinhala): 250,000, Divaina (Sinhala): 156,000, Virakesari (Tamil): 140,000, Ada (Sinhala): 110,000, Daily News (English): 88,000, Island (English): 70,000, Daily Mirror (English): 76,000 (self-reported collected via their Wikipedia entry, 2018)
- **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- **News agencies:** Lankapuvath
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$520 Million (Nielson, 2013 – most recent available data)
- **Internet Subscribers:** 7.13 million (Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, September 2018)
- **Mobile Subscribers:** 32.05 million

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: SRI LANKA



SCORE KEY

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.



Even with a backdrop of political instability, Sri Lanka's overall 2019 MSI score remained at 1.80, the same as it was the last time the study was conducted in 2017. This year, the Freedom of Speech objective just crossed the threshold into the near sustainable category due to continued improvement in the legal framework after the 2015 election and the fact that no major incidents were committed against the media in 2018. Professional Journalism (Objective 2) was the only objective to decrease this year, which panelists attribute to politicization of news media, self-censorship, and few resources to pay adequate salaries or invest in quality, investigative journalism. This study separately analyzed how the media serves the public in Objective 6, with panelists noting that the media tends to reflect the views of the government, media owners, or the elite, rather than the concerns or needs of the general public.

The year of 2019 marks a decade since the end of Sri Lanka's civil war and a decade since Sri Lanka's media have had to report on issues in a country struggling to emerge from bitter conflict that ravaged its people for more than three decades. In the intervening ten years since the end of the war, the media, too, have been struggling to provide fair, objective and balanced news that creates more opportunities for reconciliation in the post war setting.

Last year, however, tested the integrity of the media in the country, as a constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka split the media into two camps—those which supported the status quo and those who opposed it. In October 2018, President Maithripala Sirisena decided to sack his cabinet and to appoint former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister, having unconstitutionally removed the incumbent, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. This led to a 51-day government which could not function, as Speaker of Parliament Karu Jayasuriya refused to recognize its legitimacy. As the executive and legislature locked horns, the country came to a standstill between who was right and wrong. The people saw that the media too had taken sides between the two camps, prompting people to place their faith in social media platforms for their news. However, the MSI panelists highlighted that the split in the media had also spilled over to social media, which became an increasingly divisive place for those online.

With parties resorting to legal action against the actions of the president, the Supreme Court ruled that his appointments were unconstitutional, leading to previous Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and the cabinet being sworn back in. This power struggle

between the president and the prime minister, which has existed in one form or another since 2015, has further complicated an already difficult environment for media to operate in the country. As a result, mainstream media organizations are splitting their loyalties between the two main political parties of the country—one headed by the president and the other by the prime minister. Politicization of the media sector was an important point discussed during the MSI panel discussion, and the panelists agreed that this was limiting the effectiveness and independence of Sri Lanka's media. State media, was used inappropriately to promote the agenda of the group in power during the October 2018 crisis which showed how vulnerable their situation was. In the meantime, citizen media and alternative web media institutions found the independence they need to operate in a middle ground. This crisis was also a time when a discourse was created for more accountability in the media. Various independent groups backed this by stating that "trust in media had been lost," but whether these groups were politically motivated remains a question.

Against this backdrop of political infighting, Sri Lankan media institutions are struggling more than ever to stay financially afloat. Three smaller print media organizations had to shut down their operations as the cost of imported newsprint spiked in the latter part of the year, and some have had their financial backers withdraw. The overall score remained the same from the initial MSI study in Sri Lanka in 2017 (1.80), reflecting that the state of journalism remains the same in the country. However, there is some optimism that as the online space grows, it may provide mainstream media and journalists with an alternative source of revenue and a venue for freedom of expression.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

2.03

In the four years since the 'Good Governance' government of President Maithripala Sirisena came into power in 2015, panelists stated that they have seen a visible improvement in freedom of speech in the country, though much is left to be desired. This was indicated in the improvement of this objective's score when compared to the last MSI study. This was also the highest scoring objective for Sri Lanka and shows that the space for the media is improving.

The Sri Lankan constitution refers to the importance of freedom of speech in Article 14 (1) which states that, "every citizen is entitled to freedom of speech and expression, including publication." However, in the very same constitution, Article 15 restricts this right in instances when "racial and religious harmony are under threat, parliamentary privilege is violated, it is in contempt of court, defamation, or is an incitement to violence." Apart from this, the country also has laws such as the Public Security Ordinance 1959 which allows the president to declare a state of emergency at any time "he/she feels that security of the state is at stake." In an emergency, the president gains immense power, including suppression of the media. The Official Secrets Act of 1955 also has the power to curb the disclosure or publication of information deemed necessary for purposes of national security.

In 2016, the government introduced the Right to Information Act (RTI), but the panelists pointed out that not all parts of the country enjoy the same access to information.

Sivasubramaniam Raguram, senior lecturer in media studies at the University of Jaffna, pointed

out that journalists and civil society activists in the north continue to face threats and surveillance from defense authorities when they cover stories related to the military. He cited the example of journalists who were allegedly photographed and put under surveillance for covering the Keppapilavu land issue, which revolves around military occupation of residents' private lands, in the Mullaitivu District. For more than a year, residents in this area have been agitating and protesting outside the military camps, asking that their lands be released back to them. Raguram explained that many who went to cover the protests had allegedly been carefully watched by the military and that the military were always present at the location of the protests when media went to cover it. "This has made several people reluctant to talk to the media openly too," he said. Arumukarasa Sabesan, senior sub-editor of the Tamil language newspaper *Yar! Thinakkal* in Jaffna, added that this reluctance stems from the unlimited power in the north wielded by the state's security apparatus. "The military, having run civil administration for the best part of the last 30 years, has not changed its mindset after the war," said Sabesan.

In addition to this chilling effect on freedom of expression, Raguram pointed out practical inefficiencies when it comes to implementing laws such as the RTI. He explained that the government continues to be lackadaisical with language rights, and as a result, there are many delays when people submit their applications for information in Tamil rather than in Sinhala or English. Despite the law's requirement that a government institution supply an answer to public queries within 14 working days, it often takes longer when the query is in Tamil due to a lack of translators within the system. Furthermore, there is a shortage of RTI commissioners and they are concentrated in Colombo, greatly inconveniencing the average citizen outside of the capital.

He added, "Soon people lose interest in the process."

Samanthika de Silva, executive producer at state-owned broadcaster Independent Television Network (ITN), felt that the government has not attempted to curb freedom of expression and that Sri Lankans are now free to express themselves without consequence. She highlighted that the social media sphere in particular had opened up space for the general public and for critics, and many had turned to social media when they found no space in mainstream media.

Mohamed Fairouz, editor of the Tamil language newspaper *Saturday Vidivelli*, however, noted that the government did step in to shut down social media platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram during the communal unrest between Sinhalese and Muslim groups in Digana, Kandy in March 2018 in order to curb the spreading of "false news." He observed that, while this shut down helped cool down tensions between the communities to a certain extent, it also prevented people from communicating with their loved ones and sharing vital information. Furthermore, it also hindered reporting on the incident.

Another worry lies in the government's attempts to introduce a new law, the Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) to supplement the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Raguram noted that many in Sri Lanka are skeptical and worried about how national security will be defined in the CTA. The PTA was introduced in 1978 to empower state security agencies to act swiftly when there are imminent national security threats; it specifically prohibits the printing, publishing or distribution of information without the prior written approval of a competent authority, and it specifically prohibits publication of any issue that might incite violence. Given the opposition to this law over the years and

its draconian measures, the government, when it sponsored the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 in 2015, promised to repeal the PTA and replace it with anti-terrorism legislation more in line with contemporary international best practice. Many, however, now worry that passage of the CTA would give the government wider powers than the PTA to suppress any dissent in the country.

If new laws are an issue, Pradeep Weerasinghe—a senior lecturer in mass media at the University of Colombo and Chairman of the National Secretariat for Media Reforms (NSMR)—also worried about more archaic laws which have escaped reform for many years and continue to be major barriers to freedom of expression in the country. For example, under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act of 1953 (amended in 1984), no citizen is allowed to criticize the actions of members of parliament or take a politician to court over anything he or she has said in session while addressing the parliament. Further, Weerasinghe also strongly criticized the action of President Maithripala Sirisena to reactivate the Sri Lanka Press Council in 2015, via 1973's Press Council Law No. 5. This law, which has lain dormant for many years, gives the government wide-ranging powers when activated, including censorship of the media and imprisonment of media personnel.

The panelists observed that media freedom has visibly improved in the country, resulting from relatively few threats against the media (both in and out of court) and because no major incident has taken place which could threaten the freedom of expression. Chandrasekara Dodawatta, convener of the Free Media Movement (FMM), characterized it as being “easy to sail when the seas [are] calm.”

Apart from government-related censorship concerns, Dodawatta highlighted existing censorship related to cultural and religious issues. In addition to

potential government censorship, certain members of the public, including journalists, accept self-censorship with regard to sensitive matters surrounding religious or cultural norms. The best example of this is the banning of the book *Budunge Rasthiyaduwa* (The Buddha's Wanderings) in Sinhala in August 2018 for having allegedly offended Buddhism and Buddhist sentiments. The Minister of Cultural Affairs at the time also asked that the author, K.K. Shrinath, and his publisher be arrested, though they were later released on bail. This freedom of expression, thus, is very fragile and could collapse at any time. It is not sustainable, according to Dodawatta.

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

- ▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.

The unpredictability of the situation, Dodawatta said, is marked by the website, Lanka e-news being randomly blocked by the government, with no explanation. “We were not told on what basis it was banned either. So, the culture of impunity still prevails. Though the number of incidents are less and are not that serious. There is impunity in the country,” he added.

Weerasinghe quipped that the government is no longer using press laws to suppress the media but rather is resorting to other means: The Lanka e-news website was blocked by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) over a licensing issue, not because the website was being censored for its content. This showed that the authorities are still in the business of suppressing information they do not want disclosed, even though the methods of suppression have changed.

As the discussion about freedom of expression moved into the social media sphere, some panelists were of the view that most of the outdated press laws do not matter, as social media allows the public to access news and information without government interference. However, Jamila Najmuddin, editor of the Sri Lankan News in Asia website and correspondent for Xinhua News (China), pointed out that much like legacy media, social media is also a highly divided place with little regard for the truth. To Najmuddin, Sri Lanka now has social media divided along political lines, between support for the former regime and for the current one. She further noted that journalists on social media get attacked by supporters from one side or the other for their reporting. Weerasinghe added that there now are “social media soldiers,” or trolls, who support certain politicians or famous personalities. “The technology which had given you the opportunity to make your voice heard is no longer free; it now also has the tools to suppress your voice,” he said.

Fairooz shared an example where a news website known to him was blocked for a day because they had published certain information about a powerful politician. “Though we think that the internet has brought more freedom, it can also be suppressed. The government even blocked social media when we had social unrest in Kandy,” he said.

“The technology which had given you the opportunity to make your voice heard is no longer free; it now also has the tools to suppress your voice,” Weerasinghe said.

Freedom of speech, in the end, comes down to accountability said Sabesan. None of the earlier abductions or murders of journalists during the civil war and in the immediate aftermath have been resolved yet, and those who committed these crimes have been allowed to roam free. Examples of such cases include the murder of the former editor of the *Sunday Leader* newspaper, Lasantha Wickrematunga (2009); the disappearance of cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda (2010); the attack on journalist Keith Noyahr (2008); and the disappearance of Jaffna-based journalist Subramaniam Ramachandran (2007). Najmuddin—who had previously worked with slain editor of the *Sunday Leader*, Lasantha Wickrematunga—pointed out that they could not completely feel free because his assassins have not been caught. “If people who murdered journalists are roaming free, what safety do we have?” she remarked. She further observed that as journalists in Sri Lanka they still tend to come under pressure with regards to what to report and what not to, adding, “And this pressure is not necessarily life-threatening, but these are now more in the form of requests.”

Such requests—as journalists like Rathindra Kuruwita, news editor of the English language daily newspaper *Island*, pointed out—can also come from the private sector and business interests, not only the government; the private sector, he felt, had more power to curb freedom of expression and news. “We are always under pressure from companies to not report things. This should also be taken into account,” he said.

Overall, while there has been little improvement in the legal framework which hinders the freedom of expression in the country, the panelists feel that the political environment provides them space to discuss alternative political opinions, to criticize the government for its inefficiency, and to support freedom of expression without fear of grave consequences.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.67

The quality and professional standards of Sri Lankan journalism continue to receive a low score, and this year it experienced a decline from the previous MSI study in 2017 (1.71).

Media ownership in Sri Lanka has always been controlled by the government and private owners who, more often than not, are linked to one political party or the other. Unfortunately, the ownership of the media does not reflect diversity in terms of structure and has inadequate representation of community groups. Sri Lanka does not have public media per se, as the state media is controlled by the government/political party in power. De Silva who works for the state media broadcaster said they needed to work to support the will of the ruling “whichever government that is in power.” According

to her, they have to report within a framework, given that they are state media.

Weerasinghe also noted that media owners often impact the editorial impartiality of news reporting. Further, it has now become a trend for mainstream media to source news stories from social media sources with no fact-checking in place.

Raguram remarked that the politicization of news media is so severe that even the ordinary citizen can now easily identify the particular political affiliations of certain media outlets and that their stories had become blatantly biased. This signified that not only state media, but even private media, have to ensure their journalists conform to the interests of their owners. Sabesan explained all private media institutions have their own agendas, and the journalists are required to work within those confines. “All journalists have to adopt the policy handed down by the media owners, but I think that even within that framework they can do something positive for society,” he said.

Lasanthi Daskon, attorney-at-law and independent accessibility consultant in Sri Lanka, questioned as a reader and as a citizen how journalists decide what information is deemed important and what is not, within the confines in which they work. She asked the panel whether journalists think of ethics and integrity when working within such a restricted environment. The panelists, however, insisted that, increasingly, commercial interests and pressure from private enterprises are becoming more powerful than political censorship in the newsroom, overshadowing ethical concerns.

Kanchana Dhasanayake, chief editor of the Sinhala language daily *Ada*, remarked that although people frequently speak of censorship within a political framework, they face more pressure from commercial interests than they do from government sources, asking that stories which hurt their own

commercial interests not be published. He added that as an editor he is also aware that when dealing with controversial topics, the likelihood of facing a lawsuit or being taken to the Press Complaints Commission is higher, and his organization is not interested in going through such long and drawn out processes to procure a news story. "It is time consuming and expensive. So, we ask our journalists to stay away from stories which can get us into trouble," he said.

When asked whether editors discourage reporters from covering certain issues, Senior Political Writer Sanjaya Nallaperuma of the Sinhala weekly *Lakbima News* reported that they are asked not to report on news that is disadvantageous to the owner of the organization, whilst Fairouz added that they ask reporters to refrain from reporting news items that could be used, rightly or wrongly, in a defamation lawsuit against his media organization. Red FM's Assistant News Editor Vaishnavy Velraj, in the meantime, noted that censorship is not just avoiding a topic but also reporting it in such a way that facts, which are seen as undermining the owner's interests, are left out. "At times we are asked to leave out details which can anger those in power," he said.

Dodawatta noted that, more often than not, the stories on which organizations choose to report rather than what they leave out indicate their interests and are more revealing of their own version of censorship.

Kuruwita explained that given the limited resources most media organizations have, they are left with little choice other than to decide what is important to them and what is not. Further, according to him it is hard to define public interest. "Everyone works according to their view of the world and we too have to deal with that," he said.

In terms of whether news coverage has

more weight than entertainment programming, all panelists unanimously agreed that entertainment is given more prominence than informative programming, as entertainment attracts more advertising revenue and viewership interest than news. Daskon who campaigns for rights of those with disabilities, stated that it is very difficult to get media to cover social issues such as hers because they are looking for entertainment.

There are three things that are important for media: Inform, instruct, and entertain. However, Sri Lanka media mostly covers just politics and crime, noted Sabesan. For a country which has undergone more than three decades of civil war and multiple insurrections, politics and crime are the beats most journalists cover. At present, though, the audiences have changed but Sabesan noted that the journalists themselves have not changed to cater to a changing and diverse group of readers and consumers of information.

A common thread among all panelists when it came to professional journalism was the low pay awarded to many in the profession. According to industry reports, English-speaking journalists on average earn higher than journalists working in the Sinhala and Tamil media. An entry-level reporter for an English-language daily newspaper would earn close to \$110 (LKR 20,000) per month while a similar reporter in a Sinhala or Tamil daily would earn around \$55 (LKR 10,000) per month. A senior desk head (e.g., news editor) in English-language media could earn up to \$417 (LKR 75,000) per month while it would be slightly lower in the Sinhala and Tamil media. Print media correspondents, on the other hand, earn between \$0.83-\$1.38 per news item, depending on its length. Television reporters receive around \$8.33-\$11.11 (LKR 1500-2000) per clip while web news reporters earn around \$166 (LKR 30,000) on average per month for their work.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

- ▶ Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- ▶ Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- ▶ Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- ▶ Journalists cover key events and issues.
- ▶ Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- ▶ Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- ▶ Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- ▶ Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

As salaries have been stagnant for many years and thus unattractive to job-seekers, few are choosing to enter the profession. Dhasanayake noted that given the low salaries, they cannot afford to hire better professionals, and thus it feeds into the vicious cycle of not being able to produce quality journalism, let alone investigative journalism. "When we can't hire the best, the quality of journalism drops. We also can't spare money or time to undertake more investigative pieces. Thus, many don't undertake investigative journalism in the field," he said.

Sanjaya Nallaperuma, senior political columnist for *Lakbima News* in Galle, explained that most media outlets get their news from regional correspondents who have to focus on quantity rather than quality to make ends meet. He explained

that one correspondent may supply news to multiple outlets in a day to earn as much as possible. This also means that they are just running around to get whatever voice cut they can. "There is no in depth questioning or analysis involved," said Nallaperuma.

Chief Executive Officer of the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission Sukumar Rockwood, who runs a yearly journalism awards program, noted that the state of investigative journalism in the country is reflected by the fact that for most years there are no entries for the investigative journalism category from Sinhala and Tamil language media. Raguram, who is also part of the journalism awards judges' panel, added that most pieces which are submitted from English language media are descriptive with no analysis. He noted that they cover topics in a general manner. "We see no investigation done. This is probably because journalists... are [often] not allowed to specialize in any particular field. There is no time for that," added Raguram. Najmudin, adding to the conversation, explained that most journalists who want to undertake investigative journalism are not guided or mentored properly into it. "They come back with basic facts and no more," she said.

"When we can't hire the best, the quality of journalism drops. We also can't spare money or time to undertake more investigative pieces. Thus, many don't undertake investigative journalism in the field," Dhasanayake said.

Overall, the panelists stressed that they personally try their best to adhere to ethical and professional standards when undertaking their work. However, there needs to be more guidance and pressure from media institutions to insist that ethical standards are followed on a day-to-day basis.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

1.84

Given the fast pace of journalism today and with traditional media having to compete with online and broadcast media sources, the panelists agreed that few journalists incorporate more than one or two sources when gathering information for news stories. They argued that it is becoming more important to be the first to report the news, rather than the most reliable. As a result, accuracy and quality of journalism suffer. Kuruwita pointed out that more often than not, the number of sources a journalist approaches for a news article depends on the time available to them. "We just don't have the time to get multiple sources for a news story," he said, further highlighting Sri Lanka's competitive media environment and its demands for generating more content. Dhasanayake added that, with the increasing commercialization of the media, outlets have to produce news constantly to stay relevant. In the process, the quality of the news they produce suffers. "Many simply want to upload something even if it is not first verified, in order to finish the job. Few verify the information they get," he said.

Sabesan, agreeing with Dhasanayake, stressed that in the Sinhala and Tamil language media especially, journalists quote sources which cater to their particular audience regardless of whether it provides a balanced and accurate story. Dodawatta relating from his personal experience noted that a journalist from the regions told him that he supplies news to both a local Sinhala media organization as well as to BBC Sandeshaya. He puts in minimum effort for the local media outlet and writes whatever he wants,

but for the BBC he has to find at least three sources for his story. The media outlet and its standards thus make a huge difference in the quality of news that is sourced. De Silva sharing her experiences in the state media observed that they simply quote whatever a government official or minister says, with very little fact-checking going into the story. According to her, the habit of verifying government news is nonexistent.

Raguram, highlighting a different sort of problem, said audiences in the north are mostly exposed to news from southern India rather than Sri Lanka as cable channel operators tend to monopolize the channels to which their customers subscribe. Most have cable TV and they watch Indian news. "So, they will know more about India than Sri Lanka," he observed. This means that the excessive availability of southern Indian content and the higher priority given to southern Indian channels by cable providers have limited the cable audience's access to multiple sources of local news in Jaffna.

The government runs two television networks, ITN and the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation; a radio network, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC); and a newspaper publishing house called the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, which publishes seven newspapers (both daily and weekly) in the Tamil, Sinhala, and English languages. All panelists agreed that Sri Lanka's state media largely fails to fulfil its duty of filling in the gaps of information not provided by private media institutions. Further, state media is not capitalizing on the opportunity it has to carry out public interest programming, which it alone can afford to do. Few private media, driven by commercial interests, would take up such subject matters. For example, state media could educate the people on legal matters, knowledge of which is sorely lacking in the country. Weerasinghe said that legally all state media

need to follow the directives of the government in power, since they are the major shareholders in the institutions.

“We just don’t have the time to get multiple sources for a news story,” Kuruwita said, further highlighting Sri Lanka’s competitive media environment and its demands for generating more content.

Dhasanayake noted that there was a short-lived respite in the first few months of the new government in 2015 when state media broadcast multiple views from all political parties and segments in the country. “We called several political parties for discussions at the start, but that only lasted three months. Soon we went back to being partisan,” said de Silva.

Sri Lanka has no issue with citizens accessing alternative news sources or international media outlets such as Reuters, Agency France-Presse (AFP) or the Associated Press (AP). Some dailies also carry a section on international news as part of their own coverage. The *Weekend Express* newspaper, which has ties with *The New York Times*, publishes the latter’s articles in its own paper every day. This publication is circulated with the Tamil paper *Veerakesari* and reaches Tamil audiences who read English. *Veerakesari*, according to Fairouz, has also partnered with the Indian daily Tamil language newspaper *Dina Thanthi* to publish some parts of its own newspaper daily as an insert in *Veerakesari*. This allows local audiences to receive news from India along with their local newspaper.

With regard to media ownership, the panelists discussed the growing trend of conglomerates in Sri Lanka’s media industry. These conglomerates are owned by a few individuals who tend to

monopolize information. For example, Derana Media, which started off with a news television network, has expanded into radio, online news sites, and a newspaper in recent years. Weerasinghe noted that to the wider public, the topic of media ownership is a closely-guarded secret. The research and advocacy firm Verite Research in 2018 undertook a study of Sri Lanka’s media ownership, but Weerasinghe pointed out that this study mainly concentrated on the English language media, and it was uploaded to a website many people do not know about. The audience needs to have a mechanism to know who the media owners are to understand bias in the respective media outlets—but this is well-hidden. “Even if you get to know who the directors of the company are, it may just be a front for someone else,” he said. Nallaperuma quipped that even details from the company’s registration may not reveal who really owns the company, making transparency in media ownership very murky.

Dhasanayake, however, pointed that normally publishing houses do not receive a license to start a television network from the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL) even though a person owning a television network can start a newspaper, since permits are not required for newspapers. A study of the list of licensed broadcasters registered with the TRCSL proves this to be true.

Regarding the issue of media highlighting a broad range of voices, Weerasinghe observed that the Colombo-centric media industry still tends to only concentrate on bringing out the voices of the so-called Colombo elite. “When someone outside of this circle is reported on, they are more often than not victims in some tragedy. It is never a positive story,” he said.

Fairooz felt that minority voices are not given

a place in mainstream media coverage. The Muslim community, especially, he said does not feel that their voice is given due place in the Sinhala media, which has resorted to a distorted picture of the community. The majority of Tamil-speaking people in the country (including Tamils and Muslims) in the meantime also felt that the Sinhala media did not care for minority concerns, he added. In the same way, he admitted that the Tamil media did not cover the Sinhala community enough and what coverage exists is done in a negative manner. Sabesan attributed this to a long-time mindset of Tamils thinking that all Sinhalese were bad, and Sinhalese thinking that all Tamils were terrorists. This has been reflected in the stances the respective media outlets have taken, he said.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.

For Dodawatta, to whom the media reflects the society it operates in, the media is ingrained to reflect the view of the majority in any society, which has the most reach. Considerations about diversity are not part and parcel of it.

Dhasanayake, speaking from the perspective of working in a Sinhala media outlet, said that at times they could not cover issues of all ethnic groups due to a lack of resources and language barriers. Many in the Sinhala media do not understand Tamil, so they do not have access to their news. People from all ethnic groups work for English newspapers, so there is no language barrier to news. To help break this barrier, Dhasanayake noted that he has taken steps to publish half-a-page of news every week which is carried in all Tamil newspapers. Verite Research helps him collate the news from each language publication every week.

Daskon who works with those with disabilities noted that, apart from language, few outlets cater to the deaf and blind community. Only the state-run media outlets have sign language interpreters during their daily news broadcast and no media outlet caters to the braille reading community.

Overall, the panelists argued that there is little interest in diversifying media content and in catering to diverse audiences primarily because of the lack of will among the management, which again is only motivated by profit.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.57

Following global trends, Sri Lankan media are struggling financially. Competition from free online sources for news and social media plays a crucial role in the spreading of information, making people less likely to purchase a

newspaper or watch television. Additionally, a weakening economy in the country has decreased advertising revenue for many media outlets. Further, the panelists pointed out that the increasing price of newsprint in the global market, coupled with the government's decision to increase the tax on imported newsprint, have doubled the price of newsprint in Sri Lanka since late 2018. This led many smaller publications and struggling newspapers to close down operations in late 2018.

Raguram noted that the main problem lies in media companies not having alternative business models to that of direct advertising: All depend on advertising revenue with no other alternative sources of income. Weerasinghe added that only a few commercial enterprises in Sri Lanka advertise, and thus there is a limited amount of advertising revenue to go around, and it has not increased over the years. As a result, many of these media outlets get their money from political outlets. "They are not making profit," he said. Sabesan observed that it is imperative that media be commercially independent, but many are facing the issue of generating revenue in the industry. Sadly, this has also compromised the quality of news. "We have become more profit driven than [public] service oriented," he observed.

According to Nallaperuma, Sri Lanka has to also deal with the limitations of a small market. In India, newspapers print many editions, and there is more print because India has a larger market. In contrast, Sri Lanka prints a very small numbers of newspapers, and companies cannot make much of a profit in a small market. In spite of that, competition within the Sri Lankan market is also high, he added. He explained that earlier the government used to provide newspapers with tax concessions on the import of newsprint, but those have been recently

removed. Nallaperuma highlighted how his own daily newspaper, *Lakbima News*, had to be shut down in mid-2018, as it was no longer profitable to run. Another Sinhala broadsheet called *Rivira* which printed both a daily and weekly shut down in January 2018. They had already closed down their English weekly *The Nation* in December 2017. Apart from this, the Sinhala language weeklies *Janayugaya* and *Saththanda* also closed operations in January 2018 as a result of their main financiers pulling out. The former had only been started in April 2017.

"We have become more profit driven than [public] service oriented," Sabesan observed.

As legacy media struggles, more online platforms have also popped up. According to Fairouz, however, these have also not been making much money, as people have not caught up to the idea of online advertising. While many start news websites given the low overhead costs, they do not last long given that advertising is hard to obtain.

The media companies that are doing well in the country are ABC Network, Derana Television Network, and the publishing house Wijeya Newspapers Pvt Ltd. ABC Network and Derana started off in radio and television and then diversified into publishing. Though some observed that these two companies may also be receiving funds from other political sources, the companies have done well in terms of popularity and ratings. Wijeya Newspapers—which publish the newspapers *Daily Mirror* (English) and *Lankadeepa* (Sinhala)—have the highest circulation. Being a privately-run media organization, it is able to maintain a modicum of independence in reporting and is increasingly using social media and online platforms to promote their newspapers, which has garnered them a wider reach.

Apart from this, Dhassanayake noted that MBC Network, under which television stations such as Sirasa TV (Sinhala) operate, has begun producing Sinhala films in order to generate additional income to supplement their news stations. Other publishing houses, such as the state-owned publishing house Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, run their own commercial printing section to supplement their income along with publishing newspapers.

Fairooz added that his own company which mainly publishes Tamil newspapers such as *Veerakesari* had entered into agreements with newspapers in southern India such as *Dina Thanthi* to publish a pullout of the latter's paper in the *Veerakesari* publication. This has helped the southern Indian Tamil-language paper reach a wider audience in Sri Lanka, and advertising from India or Sri Lanka published in that pullout is shared among the two companies.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

In Jaffna, many outlets are being sustained on diaspora investments, according to Raguram, but he observed that many of them do not have a sustainable business plan to keep it going once the funding dries up.

Regarding the role of advertising agencies, Weerasinghe said few agencies control the whole market; in addition to that, there are buying agencies which are controlling the space available for advertising. "All in all, advertising agencies dictate the media industry," he said. These agencies, based in Colombo, are mainly multinationals—such as Leo Burnett and Ogilvy— mixed with Sri Lankan companies, including Triad, Phoenix and Grants.

Dhassanayake relating his experiences with his own newspaper *Ada*, which is the second Sinhala daily published by his company Wijeya Newspapers, said although his newspaper has made it to the number two position in the field, advertising companies refuse to place ads with it because they have already given his company their quota of advertising. According to him, all of the agencies simply want to evenly spread out advertising revenue between all media outlets regardless of their readership or circulation.

These agencies are also growing in power, and Dhassanayake noted that they dictate editorial policies in many media outlets. Some companies who support certain political figures ask that the media outlet not publish anything against the politician they support. They ask that the media outlet listen to them in order to get advertising from their company. "I am not sure for how long editors can fight the pressure from these agencies, especially with many running at a loss," he said.

In Jaffna, Raguram noted that the media has a love-hate relationship with the government. Though they support opposition voices in their newspaper, they are also careful to maintain good relations

with the authorities in order to get government advertising.

Many panelists complained that advertising has started to take precedence over news. Dhassanayake noted that it is only Derana and the ABC Network which maintains the 1:3 ratio between advertising and news as they are financially viable enough to dictate terms to the agencies.

Regarding government subsidies in the media sector, de Silva stated that her own station is legally defined as being semi-government and is registered under the Company Act. As a result, they need to earn their own revenue with little support from the government.

According to the moderator Ashoka Darshana, the state-run radio stations, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, are heavily subsidized by the government, and the money allocated for capital expenditure is being used to pay employee salaries, as these organizations at present generate little profit.

Nallaperuma also noted that in the last two years the government had also made a decision to advertise government gazettes, circulars, job opportunities, and the like in state-owned newspapers, mainly to increase their revenues.

Private media, too, depend on government advertising, but they do not receive any concessions from the government. At times the powerful ministers within the government use this as a bargaining chip to control the media, noted Dhassanayake. He related how certain cabinet ministers had circulated a rumor after the constitutional crisis in October 2018 that media institutions who supported the former president would not receive any government advertising. "This was not a policy decision they made, it was just a rumor they circulated. But it got the reaction they wanted," he said.

The panelists agreed that market research is not used to decide the types of stories they pursue. Dhassanyake said that his company would undertake a survey from time-to-time when the circulation of their newspapers dropped, but currently there is no dedicated research staff. Few have the time or the means to undertake such research.

The panelists questioned the reliability and veracity of the broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and internet statistics that media outlets publish. These ratings are mostly dependent on self-reporting and are often exaggerated.

Moreover, Weerasinghe noted that one-and-a-half years ago, the government undertook a study of the television ratings system, and the government discovered that as whole none of the media organizations trusted the publicly available ratings or circulation figures. "The industry is small so these rating companies can undertake a proper study, but they too do not have the money to do it," he said. Further, the research methodology used by these companies is highly questionable, leading to many not accepting their reports.

De Silva also observed that there have been technical issues with regard to the devices which monitor broadcast numbers, and they are not reliable either.

Overall, given that most media organizations depend on quickly declining advertising revenue, financial independence remains a challenge.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

1.90

For 2019, panelists gave a reduced score to this objective when compared with the 2017 study (1.96). While there are various bodies that work to support media in Sri Lanka—including professional journalists associations, the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, university programs, media policy advocates, NGOs and international media development organizations—many panelists questioned their effectiveness and relevance in the lives of journalists in the field and expressed a desire for development in this area.

Dodawatta, whose association works to support a culture of free media and ethical media usage, noted that there is only one trade union working on legal protections for journalists, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SWJA), which has not been very successful in winning the rights of professional journalists. On paper, the SWJA has a membership of over 1,200, and its goals include standing up for the right of free expression and free media, protecting the rights and the dignity of journalists, and enhancing professionalism. He added that they have also not been very active over the past few years.

Rockwood noted there are 35 recognized media associations, 17 of which are national, and that each group had set up their own association for various purposes. Apart from the Free Media Movement, the country also has the Federation of Media Employees' Trade Union (FMETU) which has been working actively to promote trade union rights of working journalists. They have been actively involved in fighting for the rights of journalists who face poor working conditions. In addition, the

Broadcasters Guild, Producers Union, Jaffna Press Club, Muslim Media Forum and Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists Alliance are among the many organizations which have been established. Further, each region has its own association for local journalists.

Nallaperuma, however, pointed out that although there are numerous organizations working for the benefit of journalists, they have not been able to overcome many challenges in the workplace. He alleged that few stood up for journalists who have lost their jobs in the recent past, making working journalists reluctant to join these organizations. Dodawatta explained that it has been very difficult to build strong networks within and between media organizations, as journalists have been reluctant to work together to make the movement stronger. Dodawatta further stated that the unions and associations are created for journalists and, as such, they are interconnected. "When journalists do not join, the union or association is weak, and they cannot do much when things go wrong," he noted.

"Practical skills are the most important in journalism, so you need lecturers who have practical experience in the newsroom to teach," remarked Weerasinghe.

Strong unions exist in state media institutions where employees are allowed to unionize within the organization, unlike in private media institutions. These unions, however, are attached to a particular political party, and not all of the members are professional journalists (for example, they maybe clerical or printing staff). During the October 2018 constitutional crisis, Fairouz recalled how members of a union, affiliated with a particular party in power at the time, forced the editorial staff of the state-run newspapers to print what they wanted on their

front-page editions. One of the editors that they pressured later resigned in protest. Whether these unions, at the end of the day, contribute to the development of the media field is questionable.

Another issue greatly affecting these associations and unions is the lack of young media professionals joining them. Dodawatta observed that the FMM has had trouble recruiting new blood, as few are interested in dedicating time and effort towards work outside of the office.

NGOs that work in the media sphere include the Sri Lanka Development Journalists Forum (SDJF, the organization that implemented this study) which is working to further the country's democratic gains; promote pluralism, transformation and reconciliation; and support and train mid-career journalists on media, reconciliation, and democratization. Organizations such as Viluthu Resource Centre, Centre for Policy Alternative, Prathiba Media network, Centre for Investigative Journalism used to conduct various training programs on a wide range of thematic areas with the support of international NGOs. Additionally, the National Secretariat for Media Reforms (NSMR) works with international media support for national media policy reform. Apart from these, international organizations—such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, IREX, the Thompson Reuters Foundation, Internews, and Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT)—operate in the country. They provide journalists with training opportunities, advocate for wider media freedom, conduct media research, work on media development, and support local media associations to implement media programs in Sri Lanka. Some work directly in Sri Lanka and some work with a

partner organization.

Rockwood noted that there is no specific degree for journalism, but Weerasinghe said that journalism was mostly taught under a mass communication degree in six universities in the country. These universities include the Sri Palee Campus in Horana, Trincomalee Campus in Trincomalee, University of Kelaniya in Kelaniya, University of Sri Jayawardenapura in Nugegoda, the University of Jaffna in Jaffna, and the University of Colombo in Colombo.

Raguram, who teaches a media and communications course at the University of Jaffna, noted that they try to their best to provide the students with both theoretical and practical training given the limited resources at hand. He noted that rather than three years of course work, the degree is now being split into two years of course work and a one-year internship program at national media outlets to improve students' practical skills.

"Practical skills are the most important in journalism, so you need lecturers who have practical experience in the newsroom to teach," remarked Weerasinghe, who also noted that there are only a handful of current lecturers with experience working in the media. Thus, graduates from these degree programs often have to re-learn everything when they enter the workplace.

Given the low salary scales in the field, Raguram and Weerasinghe noted that around 95 percent of their students do not take up journalism as a profession, even though they study it. Many opt, instead, to teach because teachers get better pay. In addition, due to the lack of practical skills they do not get hired anyway. "And there is no incentive to do better," said Weerasinghe. Raguram highlighted that the industry also needs to be prepared to pay better if they want good quality graduates entering the field. In his own experience,

he had switched from working in the media to an academic career due to a lack of compensation as a Tamil language journalist. In January 2019, the Center for Investigative Reporting was launched to train journalists in the field of investigative journalism. It is a collective effort by a group of journalists and media trainers who wish to raise the bar in Sri Lankan journalism. The Center has been recognized as a member by the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN).

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services. | ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist. |
| ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights. | ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted. |
| ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills. | ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted. |
| ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media. | ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens. |

Kuruwita observed that journalists also receive training from organizations such as the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI), SLWJA, FMM, Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, SDJF, and Sri Lanka College of Journalism (SLCJ) which has greatly helped both

junior- and senior-level journalists improve their skills. Universities—such as Sri Jayawardenapura, Kelaniya, and Colombo—also offer external training courses for journalists.

The law does not place any restrictions on private media to purchase media equipment. Further, while there are no barriers to obtain newsprint or any other resources for newspaper publishers, the panelists remarked that there is a thriving black market in licensing the frequency spectrum for television and radio broadcasters: Companies which are granted licenses from the government to operate then can resell them at a higher price. The moderator of the MSI panel Darshana observed that frequency spectrum licensing is highly politicized and that one cannot obtain a broadcast license from the TRCSL without having any political affiliations to back them up. Weerasinghe said that there is no diversity in broadcast media, as a few individuals own a small number of large networks as a result of the politicization of the frequency spectrum licensing process and its lack of transparency. He added that neither the industry nor the private sector is interested in introducing a transparent and legal mechanism for licensing.

Weerasinghe recalled that in 2018 the Minister of Finance and Mass Media had appointed a committee to look into how an independent regulatory authority could be established to grant licenses to ensure that more players enter the field. As a member of that committee, Weerasinghe said it had prepared a draft act to address this issue. Although the government had started to address the issue of diversity in broadcast media licensing, he noted that there was little support from the industry for the draft act, as they feared that they would lose their own licenses in the process. Journalists unions were also not in favor of it, for fear that it may impact their jobs.

Community media has been virtually nonexistent in Sri Lanka. The online sphere has provided a free space for bloggers and citizen journalists to voice their opinions. This has also led to many rural areas moving to the online sphere to start their own website or social media platform to distribute news from their own villages. There are more than 100 such local news websites around the country, though it has caught on mostly in the north and the east. The wide availability of mobile phone connections in the country, far outpacing the population of the country, has also allowed youth to gain access to the internet at a lower cost. It is these groups—bloggers, citizen journalists, and youth—who practice mobile journalism and who are transforming how news is consumed in Sri Lanka. The panelists also observed that this trend shows that people increasingly prefer regional news, as national media based in Colombo fail to provide wide coverage of issues around the country.

Recently, more and more organizations have begun to increase training opportunities and professionalism in media. As the media landscape changes and the industry needs to modernize, journalists too have started to feel the need to improve their skills. The biggest challenge here lies in media trade unions and organizations being able to adequately step up to protect journalists as companies increasingly downsize or change the nature of their business.

OBJECTIVE 6: SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS¹

1.67

The issue of whether the media truly serves the people was a difficult one and required some introspection from the panelists. In Sabesan's opinion, to a certain extent the media does highlight the plight of the people and acts as a bridge between the government and the population. Dodawatta disagreed and argued that the media has become increasingly commercialized, with its first priorities being to protect its business interests and to promote profitability, not what people want. Working in the state media, de Silva said their priority had always been to deliver the message of the government to the people. "We are given guidelines to work within and we take information that is important to the government [and deliver it] to the people," she said.

Raguram felt that most mainstream media outlets are only interested in putting forward their opinions to the public, and as a result there is a vacuum when it comes to media driving public debate on issues of public interest. While there has been some progress within the media to serve as a forum for democratic policy-making, the panelists expressed doubts about whether that it is sufficient to make a significant difference. For example, when there was a dengue epidemic in 2018, all media organizations came together voluntarily to carry out public health messages for the prevention of dengue. Additionally,

¹ Objective 6 is a separate study from Objectives 1 through 5 of the Media Sustainability Index. This objective is measured using unique indicators (described in the methodology section below).

in times of natural disaster media outlets drive campaigns to raise funds to help the affected. Finally, some media outlets run campaigns on education while others, such as MTV/MBC, mobilize social capital and generate funding to address developmental needs. However, some could argue that these are not the primary role of media.

Reiterating his view on the diversity of news sources, Weerasinghe stressed that most of the articles and discussions on public issues in the mainstream media only amplify the voice of the Colombo elite and that the general public is not given sufficient space to air their views or concerns. The panelists were of the view that a small circle of activists, politicians, and academics tend to dominate media circles, and it is their opinions and voices that are being put forward through mainstream media. This may be because many media outlets are reluctant to send reporters out to the regions or to talk with marginalized groups to understand how they feel, as it is inconvenient.

“Letters written to the editor from the public at times provide citizens with more valuable information than our newspapers,” Mohan wrote in her questionnaire.

Ceylon Today Deputy Editor Sulochana Ramiah Mohan said that media also mostly focuses on political news instead of news which serves to improve the knowledge base of citizens. “Letters written to the editor from the public at times provide citizens with more valuable information than our newspapers,” she wrote in her questionnaire.

Daskon observed advocacy within Sri Lanka (especially with regard to people with disabilities) is limited to Colombo-centric advocates, and one rarely sees the participation of those really affected

in places where issues are debated and policies are formulated.

Weerasinghe highlighted how the current debate on the formulation of a new constitution is a prime example of how everything takes place behind closed doors. The media has also not taken any steps to promote constructive discussion on this issue, instead resorting simply to reporting what each “extremist” side said about the process. Thus, the discussion is limited to opportunistic politicians. Few today truly know what the new constitution looks like or what they would like to see included in it.

The media serve citizens by providing useful and relevant news and information and facilitating public debate.

SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS INDICATORS:

- ▶ The media promote and facilitate inclusive discussions about local, national, and international issues (social, political, economic, etc.) that are important to citizens.
- ▶ Reporting and discussion in the media support democratic policymaking, government transparency, equitable regulatory enforcement, and consumer protection.
- ▶ News and information provided by the media is relevant to, and informs, the choices and decisions (social, political, economic, etc.) made by citizens.
- ▶ Citizens trust that news and information reported by the media accurately reflects reality.
- ▶ It is possible for citizens to recognize partisan, editorial, or advertorial content as such.
- ▶ Editorial and partisan media content is a constructive part of national dialogue; media refrain from including “hate speech” content.
- ▶ The media expose citizens to multiple viewpoints and experiences of citizens from various social, political, regional, gender, ethnic, religious, confessional, etc., groups.

In such an environment, does the public trust the media? Raguram noted that to some extent, it does; however, one would need to read multiple newspapers or watch many television channels to get an overall perspective of the same news story. Michael J R David, former BBC producer and working director of SLBC further added that very few citizens seem to question the reliability of the news or the multiple perspectives that are offered for the same news item.

In terms of peace-building, Najmuddin said local media was rather biased and, as demonstrated during the ‘Digana’ riots in March of 2018, many social network sites and news websites resorted to spreading misinformation rather than helping calm tensions between Muslim and Sinhalese groups in the country. The tensions stemmed from a scuffle between a Sinhalese truck driver and four Muslim individuals over a traffic incident in Digana, in the Central Province, that resulted in the death of the driver. Given the ethnic background of the alleged assaulters, the situation escalated into an ethnic riot as Sinhalese mobs attacked Muslim businesses and villages in the area. News spreading over social media and other platforms fueled the flames further. A social media blackout for a few days and the deployment of the army after a week calmed the situation. Local religious leaders and civil society leaders also stepped in to broker peace between the two communities.

Velraj said the media often does not discuss their role as peace-builders and reporting the news takes precedence over the common good. Raguram noted that hate speech has become normal in news reporting with little consideration to journalism ethics. Referencing the Digana incident, Dhassanyake stated that while social media and online media were running amok, mainstream media organizations had collectively decided not to

report inflammatory news items in order to preserve peace in the area. Having experienced the negative impacts of major ethnic riots during 1983 and in the recent past, mainstream media took a thoughtful decision not cover emotionally-driven news content such as violence, destruction, and hatred related to the Digana incident.

An increase in public criticism over the actions of media institutions and the manner in which they report has also led to certain reforms taking place in the industry. Nalleperuma said that as the public start to criticize and highlight unethical reporting more, mainstream media institutions have started to re-think the way in which they operate. "There is now definitely more space for criticism of the media," added Dhassanayake.

List of Panel Participants

Pradeep Weerasinghe, senior lecturer in mass media, University of Colombo and Chairman of the National Secretariat for Media Reforms, Badulla

Sukumar Rockwood, CEO, Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission, Colombo

Sivasubramaniam Raguram, senior lecturer in media studies, University of Jaffna, Jaffna

Mohamed Fairouz, chief editor, *Saturday Vidiweli*, Batticaloa

Vaishnavy Velraj, assistant news editor, Red FM, Wattala

Jamila Najmuddin, editor, News in Asia, Colombo

Samanthika de Silva, executive producer, Independent Television Network, Colombo

Rathindra Kuruwita, news editor, *Island*, Malwana

Sabesan Arumukarasa, senior sub-editor, *Yarl Thinakkara*, Jaffna

Sanjaya Nallaperuma, senior political columnist, *Lakbima News*, Galle

Kanchana Dhasanayake, chief editor, *Ada*, Colombo

Lasanthi Daskon, women's and disabilities rights activist, IFES Sri Lanka, Colombo

Chandrasekara Dodawatta, convener, Free Media Movement, Colombo

Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, deputy editor, *Ceylon Today*, Colombo

Michael J R David, former BBC producer and working director, SLBC, Nugegoda

Moderator

Ashoka Dharshana, visiting lecturer in journalism and communication studies at the Sanasa University and news editor (English) at the Independent Television Network, Colombo

Author

Zahrah Imtiaz, journalist and independent media analyst, Colombo.

The panel discussion was convened on February 9, 2019.

METHODOLOGY

IREX prepared the MSI in cooperation with USAID as a tool to assess the development of media systems over time and across countries. IREX staff, USAID, and other media-development professionals contributed to the development of this assessment tool.

The MSI assesses five “objectives” in shaping a successful media system:

1. Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.
2. Journalism meets professional standards of quality.
3. Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable, objective news.
4. Media are well-managed enterprises, allowing editorial independence.
5. Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

These objectives were judged to be the most important aspects of a sustainable and professional independent media system, and serve as the criteria against which countries are rated. A score is attained for each objective by rating between seven and nine indicators, which determine how well a country meets that objective. The objectives, indicators, and scoring system are presented below.

Scoring: A Local Perspective

The primary source of information is a panel of local experts that IREX assembles in each country to serve as panelists. These experts are drawn from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, and academic institutions. Panelists may be editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers. Additionally, panels comprise the various types of media represented in a country. The panels also include

representatives from the capital city and other geographic regions, and they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants are included on the following year's panel. IREX identifies and works with a local or regional organization or individual to oversee the process.

The scoring is completed in two parts. First, panel participants are provided with a questionnaire and explanations of the indicators and scoring system. Descriptions of each indicator clarify their meanings and help organize the panelist's thoughts. For example, the questionnaire asks the panelist to consider not only the letter of the legal framework, but its practical implementation, too. A country without a formal freedom-of-information law that enjoys customary government openness may well outperform a country that has a strong law on the books that is frequently ignored. Furthermore, the questionnaire does not single out any one type of media as more important than another; rather it directs the panelist to consider the salient types of media and to determine if an underrepresentation, if applicable, of one media type impacts the sustainability of the media sector as a whole. In this way, we capture the influence of public, private, national, local, community, and new media. Each panelist reviews the questionnaire individually and scores each indicator.

The panelists then assemble to analyze and discuss the objectives and indicators. While panelists may choose to change their scores based upon discussions, IREX does not promote consensus on scores among panelists. The panel moderator (in most cases a representative of the host-country institutional partner or a local individual) prepares a written analysis of the discussion, which IREX staff members edit subsequently. Names of the individual panelists and the partner organization or individual appear at the end of each country chapter.

IREX editorial staff members review the panelists' scores, and then provide a set of scores for the country, independently of the panel. This score carries the same weight as an individual panelist. The average of all individual indicator scores within the objective determines the objective score. The overall country score is an average of all five objectives.

In some cases where conditions on the ground are such that panelists might suffer legal retribution or physical threats as a result of their participation, IREX will opt to allow some or all of the panelists and the moderator/author to remain anonymous. In severe situations, IREX does not engage panelists as such; rather the study is conducted through research and interviews with those knowledgeable of the media situation in that country. Such cases are appropriately noted in relevant chapters.

In 2017, IREX completed Objective 6 in the Sri Lanka study as a separate but related study to rate the extent to which the traditional media (such as newspapers and broadcasters) and new media (blogs and other online or mobile formats) capture citizen concerns in a non-partisan manner. For 2019, these questions were incorporated into the same questionnaire and panel session with the other five objectives, but as in the previous MSI study the score for Objective 6 was not included in the overall score calculation. Panelists from civil society—including academics, bloggers, media analysts, human rights and other NGO leaders—were added to give additional perspectives on how the media serves citizens.

This objective assesses the media's ability to serve as a facilitator of public debate and as an outlet for citizen voices. It measures the capacity of media to hold politicians, business, and other actors accountable. The objective and indicators for all objectives are listed in the tables below.

I. Objectives and Indicators

Objective #1: Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

- ▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- ▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Objective #2: Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

- ▶ Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- ▶ Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- ▶ Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- ▶ Journalists cover key events and issues.
- ▶ Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- ▶ Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- ▶ Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- ▶ Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

Objective #3: Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable, objective news.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

M E T H O D O L O G Y

Objective #4: Media are well-managed enterprises, allowing editorial independence.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Objective #5: Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

Objective #6: The media serve citizens by providing useful and relevant news and information and facilitating public debate.

The media serve citizens by providing useful and relevant news and information and facilitating public debate.

SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS INDICATORS:

- ▶ The media promote and facilitate inclusive discussions about local, national, and international issues (social, political, economic, etc.) that are important to citizens.
- ▶ Reporting and discussion in the media support democratic policymaking, government transparency, equitable regulatory enforcement, and consumer protection.
- ▶ News and information provided by the media is relevant to, and informs, the choices and decisions (social, political, economic, etc.) made by citizens.
- ▶ Citizens trust that news and information reported by the media accurately reflects reality.
- ▶ It is possible for citizens to recognize partisan, editorial, or advertorial content as such.
- ▶ Editorial and partisan media content is a constructive part of national dialogue; media refrain from including "hate speech" content.
- ▶ The media expose citizens to multiple viewpoints and experiences of citizens from various social, political, regional, gender, ethnic, religious, confessional, etc., groups.

II. Scoring System

A. Indicator Scoring

Panelists are directed to score each indicator from 0 to 4, using whole or half points. Guidance on how to score each indicator is as follows:

- 0** = Country does not meet the indicator; government or social forces may actively oppose its implementation.
- 1** = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not actively oppose its implementation, but business environment may not support it and government or profession do not fully and actively support change.
- 2** = Country has begun to meet many aspects of the indicator, but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces.
- 3** = Country meets most aspects of the indicator; implementation of the indicator has occurred over several years and/or through changes in government, indicating likely sustainability.
- 4** = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; implementation has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion, and/or changing social conventions.

B. Objective and Overall Scoring

The average scores of all the indicators are averaged to obtain a single, overall score for each objective. Objective scores are averaged to provide an overall score for the country. IREX interprets the overall scores as follows:

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.