

**Reporting Ethnicity in the Vernacular Press in Sri Lanka  
(1976/1977 – 2005/2006 – 2010/2011)**

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## **Declaration**

This research thesis was carried out under the supervision of Prof Tissa Kariyawasam and Prof Dhammika Ganganath Dissanayake of the University of Sri Jayawardenepura and neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted to any other university or academic institution for any other degree/diploma program.



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**Declaration by the Supervisors**

We certify the above statement is true and correct to the best of our knowledge and that this thesis is suitable for submission to the university for the purpose of evaluation.

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## **Abstract**

The impact of the vernacular press (print media) in Sri Lanka has largely been significant in shaping the mind-set and opinion of the public from its early days. Its role in the country's protracted ethnic conflict has had its fair share of the blame game. The news reportages of the two bi-lingual vernacular press – Sinhala and Tamil – on the conflict or otherwise had always been accused of being subjective, biased, ethnopolitically coloured or polarized. This effort is to explore the validity of such allegations with empirical evidence and if proved, to identify the reasons behind such practice. Also this research will suggest recommendations to mitigate the challenges it is facing today.

## **Acknowledgement**

“Completing a doctoral thesis is more challenging than constructing a house” Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda once told me after listening to my first presentation on this Doctoral Research. In fact, for me it was far more than what he predicted, I feel like I constructed housing complex as I am not a scholar, but a simple journalist who attempted to explore the ocean of academia in finding a solution to an issue that has been bothering him for a long time.

Amidst two hectic jobs back-to-back [one local and then another international] and extensive social and other engagements, completing this tedious work took more than five years.

This research wouldn't have seen the light of the day but for the urging of two particular persons. Professor Tissa Kariyawasam who had been my supervisor from the beginning was 'the engine' that continuously goaded me to complete this endeavour. Not only did he directly pressurize me, but used all possible influencing avenues, including my kith and kin to convince me. His perspicacity in drafting my wife Thushari as the other strong influencing factor was indeed fortuitous as it urged me on to the completion of the task I had set myself.

Filling a void in my life for over two decades since the demise of my mother – Somadevi Paranayapa – my wife Thushari wanted that I dedicate this thesis as a personal gift to her. But unfortunately she cannot take it all, has to be shared with the soul of my mother who is still behind me in every step of my life.

The advice of my co-supervisor Professor Dhammika Ganganath Dissanayake are also remembered with deep gratitude along with those of Professor Uyangoda and Professor Arangala. My former office Sri Lanka Press Institute and the incumbent International Media Support (IMS) were no less than universities in gaining both knowledge and

experience in enriching this scholarly exercise with practical substance – in both local and international theaters. I am indebted to both these institutions.

If this is the pinnacle of an academic life, one cannot reach it without the moral and logistic support of friends, teachers, relatives and even neighbours, a list of whom would be as long as this thesis is lengthy. Heartfelt gratitude to all.

I always identify myself as a journalist. Thus, this scholarly attempt is by an average journalist who aspires to make his minimum contribution to his field for its future betterment. I repeat my appreciation for those who assisted me in achieving this goal.

***Ranga Kalansooriya***

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## Abbreviations

LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
CSJ	Conflict Sensitive Journalism
SLCPCJ	Sri Lanka Code of Professional Conduct for Journalists
WNL	Wijeya Newspapers Limited
ANCL	Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
WTC	World Trade Center
NUJP	National Union of Journalists of the Philippines
SLWJA	Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association
FMM	Free Media Movement
SLMMF	Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum
SLPI	Sri Lanka Press Institute
PCCSL	Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka
SLCJ	Sri Lanka College of Journalism
NUJP	National Union of Journalists of the Philippines
PFUJ	Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists
PCIJ	Philippines Center for Investigative Journalism
CPA	Center for Policy Alternatives
SPJ	Society of Professional Journalists
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IIMC	Indian Institute for Mass Communication
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization
IWPR	Institute of War and Peace Reporting
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
CLD	Center for Law and Democracy
CFA	Cease Fire Agreement
EPDP	Eelam Peoples' Democratic Party

## **Introduction**

Democracy is impossible without a free press (Baker, 1998) and Sri Lanka's credentials in maintaining democracy is relatively satisfactory when compared to some of her Asian neighbours. However, the protracted ethnic conflict has challenged the country's democracy, its traditions and institutions to a larger extent – media is not spared.

Media activists blame successive regimes of curtailing press freedom, but it is pertinent to shed light on the media itself in order to ascertain whether it has performed its due role in such a democracy which has been threatened and challenged by a politically driven, ethnically designed, militarily ruthless conflict. According to many, media should bear a considerable portion of responsibility to the conflict that ravaged the country for over three decades.

Though the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) officially ended on May 20, 2009, the politically driven conflict and its specific root-causes still remain at large. The desired reconciliation process and political discourse on power sharing is even yet to begin – or rather nowhere to be seen. The media, too, seems to turn a blind eye to this crucial aspect.

It is an undeniable fact that the media plays an extremely vital role in defusing tension, managing conflicts and establishing democracy. As Kurspahic (2003) argues, making the independence of the media is an important part of future peace agreements and one of the must-do requirements for international acceptance of states in transition. But the real challenge is convincing the media to adopt this independence whose commercial side is necessarily a blending of two separate disciplines: business and journalism (Herrick; 2003). Apart from the commercial side, it mostly has a strong political agenda as well.

Media in Sri Lanka is often accused of being ethnically biased or polarized. Many aspects such as market forces, the political alignment of the ownership, readership influence and lack of professional standards among journalists and editors are perceived

to be the root-causes of this phenomenon. The vernacular press plays the most pivotal role in this regard.

The media often plays a major role in all political developments in the country and also immensely influences public opinion on crucial decisions. With a remarkably high literacy rate, Sri Lankans too, are very much open to the media – either print or electronic. Their frequent usage of universal franchise to change regimes since independence in 1948 had, arguably, been influenced by the media, specifically the vernacular media. Thus, the role of the media is extremely important and powerful in changing the ‘destiny’ of the country, especially in the search for a lasting solution to the protracted ethnic conflict in the country.

On the other hand, the concept of the politics of the media is an equally interesting and important component in the Sri Lankan conflict, especially in an environment where politics plays a major role in almost every sphere of life. This concept includes topics such as politicization of the media, political influence on the media and also the political actors in the media. An empirical academic research into any aspect of media could not neglect discussing those components.

Many research and academic papers have already been done<sup>1</sup> to prove the fact that the vernacular media has not been playing its due role in the conflict, but has somewhat been ethnically biased in its reportages. This has been a common phenomenon in any long protracted – mainly ethno centric – conflict in any part of the world. The media, especially the vernacular - has always been accused of being subjective, not maintaining its professional standards and being ethnically twisted or coloured. But these accusations are predominantly based on assumptions or hypothesis without scientific empirical studies.

Thus, this particular research is aimed at shedding critical light on the Sri Lankan vernacular media through both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies to explore

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<sup>1</sup> *Lakshman Gunasekera (D Sivaram memorial lecture 2007), Sanjana Hattotuwa (2003), Thiru Kandiah (2001), Suthaharan Nadarajah (2004) etc.*

whether it has been professional enough in reporting news agenda of the day which indirectly scrutinizes its due role in preserving the country's democracy by defusing the ethnic mistrust and bringing in harmony between the two parties (the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils). Thus an extensive corpus of research material both primary and secondary was examined, investigated and analysed to empirically narrate the argument.

The main focus of the entire research work is news journalism, rather than features or any other form of journalism. The news of the day not only influences the thinking pattern of its own clientele, it does also reshape the entire social fabric in both local and global levels. Its influence in a conflict theatre is extensively discussed in the Literary Review and also in other following chapters.

This study has both qualitative and quantitative components. Thus, the empirical method of inquiry has been employed in conjunction with the mixed methods approach to ascertain the trends and patterns in news journalism in Sri Lanka in the context of ethnicity.

The first chapter deals with the historical perspective of the news media in Sri Lanka, particularly in the newspaper industry, and then discusses the thematic and practical aspects of news journalism under different contextual parameters. Finding one common academic definition for 'news' is a challenging task and as many experts describe 'news' is a manufactured commodity according to the desired structures and frameworks of the relevant media company. Therefore, efforts were made in understanding news production systems, its writing structures and also most importantly the determining factors of newsworthiness. Another significant feature that is being discussed is the desired ethnic diversity of a newsroom which could be reflected in the news content of the particular newspaper. Sources are the most important element in discussing news. In an environment where journalists are extensively depending on sources, news stories are highly vulnerable to manipulation and 'being planted.' This aspect is discussed at length throughout this Chapter. Attempts are also made to justify the argument of how political subjectivity could affect the aspect of reporting ethnicity

mainly in a socio-political environment where a protracted ethnic based conflict was in existence for over three-decades.

Another popular argument on the news media is the issue of its objectivity and professionalism. Can an individual journalist be objective in his/her own story when he/she is being affected by numerous influencing factors? The chapter deals with this vital and sensitive issue in detail quoting literary reviews, expert comments and interviews. The final part of the chapter is on a survey that was conducted to ascertain the views of the vernacular newspaper readers on three specific issues: a). Whether news reportages make an impact on the thinking of the readers b). Do the newspapers provide fair space for the other ethnic community issues and c). Do the readers like to read about the other ethnic group in their newspapers.

The second chapter discusses the ethical and other professional concerns in reporting conflicts, mainly wars. During the conflict and also in its aftermath, there had been a plethora of case studies where the Sri Lankan media, mainly the vernacular press, acted according to its own ethnic and political interests while neglecting the social sensitivities as well as basic norms of journalism. Thus, choosing one among many is not so challenging, but there were a few instances where the episode went beyond reporting the incident and became a matter of life and death for journalists. Thus, this Chapter commences with such a case study where conflicting media reports of an incident that occurred in the eastern port city of Trincomalee ended in the tragic killing of a journalist. The study contains published news reports from various media outlets of different languages, its follow up reports and the killing of a journalist as a result of reporting the incident and then the concerns of the regional (provincial) journalists with regard to distorting their reports by the Colombo staff journalists.

The content of the case study is then subjected to an analysis according to accepted professional standards of ethics and Conflict Sensitive Journalism (CSJ). It was analysed using the CSJ framework that had been developed by one of the authorities on the subject, Ross Howard and on ethical standards three internationally accepted Codes

of Ethics were considered while the Sri Lanka Code of Professional Conduct for Journalists was used as the main yardstick.

The chapter also discusses another three aspects that directly impact on the content of war reporting – boosterism, patriotism and spin doctors. Boosterism helps increase newspaper circulation and media business could extensively be benefitted by the boosted war reporting while patriotism sets the agenda for news that perfectly matches the preferred market for the media. Spin doctors would act as the identified or otherwise source that feed the journalists with necessary content and information. Journalists become victims of spin doctors when reporting conflicts and wars. Spinning is applied when all parties to the war (or conflict) see media as a tool which can be manipulated to boost the morale of the fighters, spread false propaganda to win the masses as well as to demoralize and demonize the enemy. Thus media becomes another weapon at the disposal of the conflicting parties. It is a weapon that can prove to be as powerful as any military hardware. The case study is further analysed according to this three-element framework as well.

The third Chapter looks into the dominance of nationalistic, ethnic focused and antagonistic discourses in the vernacular press during three different time periods in Sri Lanka, specifically in the context of the ethnic conflict. Thus, the time periods were selected to depict the impact of the war into the reporting in the vernacular press – before the (official) commencement of the conflict<sup>2</sup> (1976/77), during the final battle against the LTTE (2005/2006) and after completion of the war that eliminated the leadership and the backbone of the LTTE (2010/2011). The empirical study on randomly selected 105 news reports from the respective Sinhala and Tamil press does not intend to measure their impact on the readership, as it may lead to another PhD standard research work. Instead, it examined the content within a framework in which its professional standards, different socio-political aspects and features such as pluralism and other basic democratic norms are scientifically studied. It further considers the emphasis and perspective of the particular story in terms of what

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<sup>2</sup> *The official commencement of the war is considered July 1983, the day of the Black-July riots.*

dominated in its content and the relative weight thus accorded to issues. This analysis is aimed at finding solution to the specific problem statement “Has the vernacular press in Sri Lanka been ethnically biased in reporting news? If so, why?” Perhaps, the selection of specific time frames for the review of news reports would eliminate several key incidents where media had extensive coverage and which made a comprehensive impact on society. But regrettably, for the practical purposes, limiting time frame was unavoidable. Apart from analyzing the selected news stories, this chapter also reviews another research conducted on a similar mandate by Suthaharan Nadarajah titled “Sri Lanka’s Vernacular Press and the Peace Process.”

The entire approach for this thesis, therefore, has several empirical approaches such as readership survey through a structured questionnaire, whose findings were subjected to a peer review discussion, unstructured interviews, case study analysis, content analysis of sample news reportages and another peer review discussion on the findings of the news report analysis.

No research is perfect in providing clear answers to all its related questions and concerns. This study may, perhaps, highlight more gaps, theoretical insufficiencies and also contain unanswered questions. In fact, this initiative would raise more questions that require further detailed research attempts to understand and find long lasting solutions to the inherited challenges in the media in Sri Lanka, which extensively lacks the academic input in determining and reshaping its present focus and future directions.

On a concluding remark, the author, as mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, requests his readers not to consider this as an extensive academic endeavour by a scholar, but an attempt by a journalist to empirically understand the challenges of his own profession through an unfamiliar academic exercise. Thus, one would easily find non-academic, but journalistic features throughout this thesis. His attempts to avoid typical journalistic practices such as simple language, short sentences and ‘say it in shortest, simplest and clearest way’ may not have been successful to a greater extent.



## **Problem Statement**

*Has the vernacular press (print) in Sri Lanka been ethnically biased in reporting news?  
If so why?*

The vernacular press (print media) in Sri Lanka has largely been accused of being ethnically biased and thus becoming part of the conflict. The respective reportages had been subjective, ethno-politically coloured or polarized, it is widely believed without any empirical proof. Hence, this research will attempt to answer this particular problem statement through an empirical study while looking into the specific reasons behind the issue.

## **Hypothesis**

This research is based on a hypothesis that various internal and external factors are influencing the newsrooms in taking decisions and mainly on ethnic bias. Attempts were made to identify these influencing factors throughout the research. Thus, the hypothesis was:

*The vernacular press has been influenced by many (academically) unidentified factors – both internal and external - in presenting ethnically biased news reportages. This has been further fueled by the lack of professionalism among journalists.*

## **Research Objectives**

General Objective: To determine the reasons for the vernacular press in Sri Lanka to become part of the ethnic conflict rather than playing its due “watchdog” role.

### Specific Objectives:

- To determine specific influencing factors in ethnically sensitive news reporting in the vernacular press.

- To determine the barriers and hardships that disturb professional practice of news reporting, mainly on ethnically sensitive stories
- To make recommendations for a professional vernacular print media culture and industry in Sri Lanka

## **Research methodology**

### Interviews

Some 42 interviews were conducted with publishers, editors, journalists, politicians, academics, newspaper readers, international experts, heads of media development organizations and activists. They represented different language and ethnic groups, key political parties and also geographical distinctions such as Colombo, Jaffna, Kurunegala, Kandy, Tissamaharama, Islamabad, New Delhi, Washington DC, Yangon and Manila. The interviews were based on unstructured and open ended questions.

### Literary survey

Though there are not many related academic publications on the subject in the local theater, plenty of literary work is available at an international level. Most of them illustrate the role of media in similar conflict situations through which parallels could be drawn to that of Sri Lanka. The most relevant and pertinent studies would be from India, Nepal, Northern Ireland, Indonesia, the Balkans and similar conflict situations, while there are a few research reports and academic papers on Sri Lanka. Detailed survey was conducted utilizing most of this literature.

### Sample Market Research

A countrywide survey among randomly selected persons was conducted in 21 major cities of all the nine provinces of the country. The number of responses collected did not correlate with the population of the cities or the provinces. Some 250 questionnaires were distributed and 221 responses were collected in total.

The survey was conducted to ascertain the views of the vernacular language newspaper readers on four issues:

1. What is the most attractive content of the newspaper
2. Whether news reportages make an impact on the thinking of the readers
3. Do the newspapers provide fair space for the other ethnic community issues
4. Do the readers like to read about the other ethnic group in their newspapers

The survey was conducted in two parallel structures

1. Receiving responses to a structured questionnaire from a selected sample focusing mainly on the quantitative aspect
2. Conducting unstructured interviews from a cross section of both Sinhala and Tamil Societies based on the findings of the sample survey

#### Sample Reportage Analysis

Selected 105 news reports from the respective Sinhala and Tamil press belonging to three different time frames were extensively examined utilizing an internationally acclaimed analytical framework. The time periods were selected to depict the impact of the war into the reporting in the vernacular press – before the (official) commencement of the conflict<sup>3</sup> (1976/77), during the final battle against the LTTE (2005/2006) and after the completion of the war that eliminated the leadership and the backbone of the LTTE (2010/2011). It examined the content within a framework in which its different socio-political aspects and features such as pluralism and other basic democratic norms are scientifically studied. It further considers the emphasis and perspective of the particular story in terms of what dominated in its content and the relative weight thus accorded to issues. This analysis was aimed at finding a solution to the specific problem statement of the research proposal – “Has the vernacular press in Sri Lanka been ethnically biased in reporting news? If so why?” - as well as justifying the hypothesis: “The vernacular press has been influenced by many (academically) unidentified factors –both internal and external - in presenting ethnically biased news reportages. This has been further fueled by the lack of professionalism among journalists.”

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<sup>3</sup> *The official commencement of the war is considered July 1983, the day of the Black-July riots.*

The initial framework of the analytical methodology was developed based on sub-indices of UNESCO's media development indicators (MDIs) in collaborative effort between Center for International Media Ethics (CIME) and the Fatima Jinnah Women's University in Pakistan. This methodology was further enhanced to evaluate the randomly selected press news reports in Sri Lanka with the guidance of UNESCO Consultant on MDI and the Executive Director of Center for Law and Democracy (CDL) in Canada Toby Mendel.

This particular analytical framework has especially been developed to evaluate the news reporting content in conflict theatres and also on societies in political transition with a special focus on professional news journalism writing standards.

#### Case Study Analysis

A case study was analyzed according to three international codes of ethics and the Sri Lankan Code of Conduct for Journalists by The Editors Guild of Sri Lanka. It was further analysed according to the Conflict Sensitive Journalism framework by Ross Howard.

#### **General Limitations**

In fact, the validity of the research topic remains since independence. The news reportages on the conflict took utmost prominence in the vernacular press, long before the television media came into the theatre. Print media was the most powerful even compared to the radio. Thus, the role of the vernacular media in the conflict commenced with the inception of the conflict itself. But, the specific attention in this research study is focused only for three specific timeframes. Concentrating on a selected sample period of a long protracted conflict is a tough exercise.

Every single piece of reportage of incidents in each language newspaper could provide a valuable research data for analysis. Especially during the sample periods, the news reportages by the vernacular press received significant attention in shaping southern and

northern public opinion – as well as that of the policy makers. Their writing styles, usage of particular words, presentations, positioning of the story on the page, selected headline - all these factors of each individual news story could have had its own impact. Therefore, selecting a particular number of stories as a sample would not entirely represent the bigger picture.

The author's incompetency in the Tamil language was a major hurdle. Depending on English translations was not a viable solution especially when analyzing the weight of words and writing styles in journalistic jargon and contexts. Therefore, the services of a Tamil research assistant were utilized in order to maintain the desired analytical standards.

Securing a strong analytical framework was a challenge due to the absence of comprehensive scientific research into qualitative media monitoring, especially for the vernacular press even on a global level. Thus, the best possible and accessible framework was further developed and enhanced to suit the local context and its reporting dynamics without affecting the components of the analytical indicators on the professional news writing methods.

Selecting newspapers to maintain a coherent sequence was also a challenge. Newspapers that played a key role during pre-conflict era such as Dawasa and Thinapathi have been out of the market by 2005-2006. Instead there were new entrants like Divaina and Sudar Oli from the early '80s. Also the ownership structure of Lankadeepa was changed after the 1977 and the political alignment of Dinamina got a new paradigm shift after 1977 elections. Non-availability of several old Tamil newspapers in national libraries and archives was another hindrance. However, this did not impact in a major way for the analysis as the available newspapers of the considered year were subjected to the exercise.