



olonials, bourgeoisies

and media dynasties: A case study of

Sri Lankan media.

Abstract:

Despite enjoying nearly two centuries of news media, Sri Lanka has been slow to adopt western liberalist concepts of free media, and the print medium which has been the dominant format of news has remained largely in the hands of a select few – essentially three major newspaper groups related to each other by blood or marriage.

However the arrival of television and the change in electronic media ownership laws have enabled a number of ‘independent’ actors to enter the Sri Lankan media scene. The newcomers have thus been able to challenge the traditional and incestuous bourgeois hold on media control and agenda setting.

This paper outlines the development of news media in Sri Lanka, and attempts to trace the changes in the media ownership and audience. It follows the development of media from the establishment of the first state-sanctioned newspaper to the budding FM radio stations that appear to have achieved the seemingly impossible – namely snatching media control from the Wijewardene, Senanayake, Jayawardene, Wickremasinghe, Bandaranaike bourgeoisie family nexus.

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Introduction: Media as an imprint on the tapestry of Ceylonese political evolution.

The former British colony of Ceylon has a long history of media, dating back to the publication of the first *Dutch Prayer Book* in 1737 - under the patronage of Ceylon's Dutch governor Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff (1736-39), and the advent of the 'newspaper' by the British in 1833. By the 1920's the island nation was finding strength as a pioneer in Asian radio but subsequently became a relative latecomer to television by the time it was introduced to the island in the late 1970's. Throughout its long history Ceylon's media has remained predominantly in the hands of select few – a bourgeoisie elite who have dominated both media and politics.

This paper traces the genesis and development of three key media technologies, harnessed by the country's political and socio-cultural elite, to shape national thinking through news content. In this context the paper contends, that media as a technology is distinct from news content and warrants independent examination.

Thus this paper discusses the chronological evolution of news media from its birth in colonial Ceylon through nationalist movements and subsequent independence to the advent of the electronic age.

The press: its colonial heritage and the subsequent bourgeoisies takeover.

The press in Sri Lanka dates back to *The Colombo Journal* published by the colony's British Governor – Robert Wilmot Hortonⁱ on January 01, 1832. However the paper edited by George Lee the superintendent of the Government Press, and the governor's private secretary and son-in-law Henry Tufnell, operated for only two years before it was closed down on December 31, 1833. While the government publicly claimed the closure was necessary for the development of newspapers in Ceylon, historians argue it was the paper's severe criticism of the British Government which led to its closure. Former Sri Lankan Director of Archives Harris de Silva (1984) suggests the closure was actually ordered by the 'home government' which disapproved the colonial administration's involvement in the local media.

Once unlocked however, the floodgates of news media remained opened, and a veritable swag of newspapers were launched onto the market – starting with the publication of the independent *The Observer and Commercial Advertiser* on February 4, 1834ⁱⁱ, which later became the *Colombo Observer*. The *Observer*, first edited by George Winter, was taken over by EJ Darley – one of the founders of the commercial company Darley, Butler and Company (De Silva, 1997) – a union which illustrates the early commercialists' interest in securing a stake in the burgeoning media power base.

Within a few months of its inception *The Observer and Commercial Advertiser* however, emerged as a vocal critic of the administration and an independent publication under the editorship of Irish doctor Christopher Elliott in 1835. Elliott is credited with introducing two cornerstones of journalism – the notion of a free press and the media's role as a critic of the incumbent government. The paper continues to be published under the *Observer* mast, but is now ironically controlled by the government.

The *Observer's* criticism of the government was met with a rival publication, the *Ceylon Chronicle* sponsored by Governor Wilmot-Horton. The newspaper was edited by the archdeacon of Colombo Samuel Owen Glennie, a clergyman close to the Horton administration, who was succeeded by George

ⁱ Sir Wilmot Horton himself was regular contributor to the Colombo Journal printed at the government press. He is believed to have written under a number of pseudonyms including 'Timon, Liber and Pro bobo publico', (Hulugalle, 1963, pp 57-63)

ⁱⁱ Interestingly the future independence day of Ceylon – February 4, 1948.

Leeⁱⁱⁱ – the former editor of the short-lived *Colombo Journal*. Despite the governor's best efforts the *Ceylon Chronicle* ceased publication on September 5, 1838 (De Silva, 1997).

Numerous other papers including the *Ceylon Chronicle* and *Ceylon Times* which later became the *Times of Ceylon* soon flooded the small newspaper market. In this context, Harris de Silva (1984) documents five English publications that had emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century, namely the *Observer*, the *Ceylon Chronicle* (1837-38), the *Ceylon Herald* (1840-46), the *Ceylon Times* (1846), and the *Examiner* (1846-1900). He also argues while newspapers in their contemporary context emerged in 1832 with the launching of the *Colombo Journal*, the *Government Gazette* first published in 1802 had carried 'news' stories to fill the information void which existed during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. He further argues the *Gazette's* current format of publishing exclusively government notices can be traced back to the 1830's and 1840's, when it dropped its general news content with the emergence of newspapers proper.

The next turning point in Ceylon's English press, and in many ways Ceylon's press in general, is marked by Don Richard Wijewardene's entry into media through his acquisition of the *Ceylonese* newspaper, which was published under the new *Ceylon Daily News* mast on January 3, 1918. The paper was initially started in 1913 by Ponnambalam Ramanathan to promote his bid to the legislative council, and to counter media support given to his opponent Dr H Marcus Fernando through the *Ceylon Morning Leader* – a newspaper owned by the de Soysa family with which he was connected through marriage.

Wijewardene's biographer, Hullugalle (1960) argues there were four other English daily newspapers at the time when Wijewardene entered the newspaper market – the *Times of Ceylon*, the *Observer*, the *Ceylon Morning Leader* and the *Ceylon Independent*. Wijewardene later acquired the *Observer* in 1923.

DR Wijewardene's foray into the newspaper industry could arguably be the singularly most important media event of the time, in that it placed the Wijewardene family at the epicenter of a politico-media dynasty which continues to hold both media and political power in contemporary Sri Lanka. In this context the Wijewardene family is closely related to the United National Party (UNP) through their relationship with the Senanayake, Jayawardene, Wickremasinghe and even the Kothalawella families; and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Bandaranaiques through a more distant marital link. The Wijewardene family also continued to be involved in all three of the country's media institutions, namely the Lake House, the Upali Group and Wijeya Newspapers. The Lake House founded by Wijewardene has now been taken over by the government where it continues to be under the control of which ever of the two major political parties is in government at the time. The Upali group is owned by the family of DR Wijewardene's nephew Upali Wijewardene, while Wijeya Newspapers is owned by DR Wijewardene's son Ranjith. Thus all three English daily newspapers – the *Daily News* published by the Lake House, *The Island* published by the Upali group, and the *Daily Mirror* published by Wijeya Newspapers, remain in the hands of a selected number of bourgeoisie families related through blood or marriage.

Sinhala Press: the move from a Christian missionary press to Sinhala-Buddhist newspapers.

Ceylon's Sinhala language press emerged as an extension of Christian missionary proselytisation in the 1830's. In his definitive work on Sinhala newspaper history, *Simhala puwatpat san garā itihāsaya* (History of Sinhala Newspapers and Magazine), Kalakonduwave Pannasekara Thera^{iv}, argues the missionary periodical *Māsika Thägga* containing biblical stories launched in 1832 to be the country's

ⁱⁱⁱ The Bishop objected to Glenie's involvement in the newspaper and was asked to resign from his position (Hullugalle, 1960, p 86).

^{iv} The honorific Thera denotes a Buddhist monk

first Sinhala media publication. Meanwhile, Pannasekara Thera claims that ‘according to available evidence’ the Kandy Sinhala Tract Society publication *Lankā Nidhānaya* edited by Rev Robert Spence in 1840 is believed to be the second Sinhala periodical produced in Ceylon.

Dharmadasa (1997) argues several other Sinhala publications produced by the Christian missionary press emerged during the next few years, including the *Uragala* (1842), *Vistrakarannā* (The Commentator) in 1844, *Sāstra Nidhānaya* (1846) and *Lankā Pradeepaya* (1846). However the publication of *Yatalaba* in 1854, edited by a Sinhala Buddhist scholar Batuvantudave Devaraksita, is cited as a turning point in Sinhala journalism, which to that juncture had been a mere tool of missionary proselytisation. *Yatalaba* – contrary to its contemporary publications focused on a series of literary debates on Sinhala poetry which became known as the *sav sat dam* controversy (Sarachchandra, 1950)

Goonaratne (1968) claims Christian missionaries monopolised printing as the main weapon against Buddhist and Hindu revivalism, and quotes Rev DJ Gogerly, the Colombo Wesleyan press manger in 1831 as saying, “It is by means of the press that our principle attacks must be made upon this wretched system...we must direct our efforts to pull down this stronghold of Satan”.

The missionaries’ fierce drive for proselytisation was countered by “aggressive and dynamic” Buddhist monks such as Migettuwatte Gunanada who, “contrast to other learned bhikkhus of the period...was a fiery orator, pamphleteer and a fighter who led the challenge to Christianity and the missionaries” (Kumari Jayawardena, "Bhikkus in Revolt" *Lanka Guardian* (May-July 1979). p. 13). The ethnic overtones of the Buddhist-nationalist journalism of the time has been widely documented (Jayawardena, 1986). The temple’s reaction to Christian proselytisation, gave rise to a phenomenon dubbed ‘protestant Buddhism’, (Obeyesekere, 1970; Malalgoda, 1976) – this shift in religio-political ideology was reflected in the temple’s foray into news media.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the Buddhist-Christian media racing each other to secure dominance in the clash of ideologies. Buddhist monks including Walane Siddhartha, Migettuwatte Gunanada and Hikkaduwe Sumangala launched ten periodicals during this time, which was countered by thirteen new Christian publications in addition to those still in print. Based on Pannasekara’s documentation however, Dharmadasa says the Buddhists eventually rivalled the Christian press by the later half of the century, producing nineteen new publications between 1888-1900.

While the religio-centric press gained momentum, so did the secular Sinhala press, which produced twelve new publications focusing on literary and scholastic interests, and five others focusing on the welfare of the Sinhala people. Once again based on Pannasekara’s documentation, Dharmadasa says the period also saw the birth of three periodicals devoted to traditional Ayurveda medicine – *Vaidya Sastralankaraya* (1894) and *Vaidyadhara Sangarava* (1896); and astrology – *Vidyadipika* and three others on Pali– the language of Buddhist text. Thus, Ceylon’s Sinhala press was deeply rooted in the political and ideological power struggle against the colonial missionary culture which had spread throughout the country.

Despite its emergence as vehicle for religio-political ideology, Ceylon’s Sinhala press and more accurately the bourgeoisie soon realised the utility of the press in promoting trade and commercial interest which in turn provided political leverage for the bourgeoisie who had carved a niche in colonial Ceylon. The transition of press control from the Sinhala revivalists to Sinhala Buddhist bourgeois was epitomised by Don Richard Wijewardene’s media dynasty which by the mid 1900’s had become the undisputed media monopoly in the island.

The shift towards ‘news’ in the Sinhala press started with the publication of *Lak Mini Pahana* in June 1862 edited by Don Johannes Panditilaka. The paper received patronage from Sinhala revivalist like the venerable Walane Siddhartha, and journalistic guidance from three Burghers – Fredrick and Lewis Nell and Charles Ambrose Lorenz, who was the owner of the English Newspaper *The Examiner*.

The new generation of Sinhala newspapers marked two significant turning points in Ceylonese media. Firstly it identified the nation's rapid economic growth and the need for the Sinhalese to be in touch with the 'news' in order to keep abreast of these developments. "In the same manner foreign traders come to know about matters pertaining to trade through English newspapers so should the Sinhala traders through Sinhala newspapers," the *Lak Mini Pahana* wrote on June 1, 1978.

Secondly the emergence of the new newspapers marked an ideological awakening of the Sinhalese, that suggested the centrality of media as the fourth estate. While the persuasive potential of the press was clear, the notion of the press as a fourth estate suggested the role and indeed the need for a balanced and responsible media, which was not merely a tool with which to achieve power, but an institution or a power base in its own merit. In a message published in the inaugural *Lak Mini Pahana*, *The Examiner* owner Lorenz clearly outlined the conceptual basis of contemporary journalism though a European based definition of the four assemblies: the cabinet of ministers and the monarch, nobles of the legislature, the gentlemen of the village and the newspapers. This new thinking also outlined the newspaper's right to question government activities, a notion Dharmadasa points out, took some time to be accepted by the wider Sinhala population.

For its part the Sinhala newspaper had embraced its role as the fourth estate, with *Lak Mini Pahana* drawing attention to the government's lopsided focus on the small British expatriate community, while largely overlooking the socio-political aspirations of the wider native population.

Despite the emergence of a secular commercial press the Sinhala revivalist movement continued to harness the media through publications such as Anagarika Dharmapala's *Sinhala Bauddhaya*, a weekly publication which, among other articles, carried a provocative column written by Dharmapala titled "dāna gata yutu karunu" (Facts that should be known). Some scholars argue it was Dharmapala's brand of nationalism which played a significant role in the growing ethnic rift in Ceylon, culminating in race riots such as the 1915 anti-Muslim clashes. For example, in the *Mahabodhi Journal* founded by Dharmapala in 1892, he wrote "merchants from Bombay and peddlers from South India who trade in Ceylon while the sons of the soil abandon agriculture and work like galley slaves in urban clerical jobs," (*Mahabodhi Journal*, October. 1909). The revivalist movement's hardline position on 'immigrants' is made clear in Dharmapala's own writings (Dharmapala, 1965).

The 1890's saw another turning point in Sinhala media, with the launch of daily newspapers. This new trend was led by newspapers such as *Dinapatha Pravurti* and *Lak Rivi Kirana*, and was followed by *Dinamina* in 1909 edited by HS Perera – the paper was later bought by DR Wijewardene in 1918 (Dharmadasa, 1997).

While the English educated elite still remained in the higher echelons of Ceylonese society, literacy in the vernacular was recognised for the first time as an acceptable prerequisite for voting in 1921. The broadening of the constituency changed the dynamics of Sri Lankan politics from elite constitutionalism to mass politics. The energies that were once focused on political bargaining with the colonial policy makers was now being diverted towards wooing the electorate, thus creating a close nexus between individual politicians and newspapers, and a focus on micro-politics. According to Dharmadasa, such connections were clearly evident. He argues that the *Lanka Taruna Handa* (March 1922), promoted the interests of Chilaw politician CE Victor S Corea, while the *Dinarada* (November 1924) also owned by Corea had introduced him to the voters as a "friend of the poor"; the *Sri Lanka Mitraya* (May 1924), he argues took up the cause of Col TG Jayewardena against political opponent James Peris; while *Swadeshika Jatyalaya* (February 1921) supported Donald Obeyesekera against EW Perera.

Sri Lanka's Tamil press: an organ of Sinhala Buddhist bourgeois politics?

Aboubucker Mohamed Abdul Azeez (1964) claims that Sri Lanka's Tamil Press is rooted in the nation's colonial heritage and more importantly the colonial missionary press. He argues, that by 1842

the Jaffna Tract Society had printed and distributed more than 149,300 Christian pamphlets, printed at the American Missionary Press in Manipay (p.323), and had launched a bilingual journal titled *Udaya Tharakai* (Morning Star) in 1841, which served the Jaffna readers for more than 130 years (Gunaratne and Wattagama, 2000).

According to Muthulingam *Udaya Tharakai* was intended for a Jaffna-based readership, a similar publication named *Udayadithan* was published in Colombo by Simon Casiechetty. A third short-lived publication named *Usaithalu* (The torch) was launched by the Roman Catholic Church for distribution in Jaffna and Colombo.

The latter half of the century saw the growth of small publications generally with geographically limited circulations and catering to the interest of a sectarian audience, rather than reporting news of the day. The Tamil media – like its Sinhala counterpart which was crucial in the Buddhist revivalist movement – were used as a central tool in Hindu revivalism, and to a lesser degree by the nation's small Islamic community.

Gunaratne and Wattagama cite a number of Tamil publications that emerged during this period, including *Paliya Narsan* (1865), *Elangai Pathukaralan* (1868) and *Alamat Lankapuri* (1869), (Gunaratne and Wattagama, 2000).

Tamil revivalism in Ceylon was pioneered by a number of Tamil Shaivaites^v, including Muttukumara Kavirayan, Shankara Pandithar and more importantly Arumugam Navalar. The Tamil revivalists were keen to harness the new-found potential and mass penetration of the press to reach a wider audience. Gunaratne and Wattagama (2000) argue periodicals such as *Illangai Nasen* (1877) and *Sivabhimani* (1884) were published exclusively for this purpose. They also argue publications such as *Muslim Nasen* (1882) and *Islam Mithiran* (1905-1940) were produced for a even more exclusive niche of Islamic revivalists by Tamil-speaking Muslim traders.

Muthulingam (1997) suggests Hindu revivalism in Bengal India also played a vital role in Ceylonese Hindu revivalism and more importantly the development of the Tamil press. In this context he argues the impact of the Bengali sage Ramakrishna's mission and its influence in Sri Lanka through Swami Vivekananda could not be ignored in the study of Ceylon's Tamil press. He argues the social reformist agenda of the post-Ramakrishnan press appealed more to the Tamil bourgeoisie, than their traditional Shaivaites counterparts. The Ramakrishna movement was thus monumental in the launch of another periodical, the *Vivekananda* in 1902.

Despite the plethora of Tamil periodicals that emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century, Gunaratne and Wattagama (2000) argue that a national Tamil press did not emerge in a contemporary format until the 1930's, with the publication of the Jaffna-based *Eelakesari* (1930-1958); and Colombo-based *Virakesari* (1930) and *Thinakaran* (1932). *Virakesari* and *Thinakaran* continue to be the longest surviving Tamil dailies in Sri Lanka.

Muthulingam says the Roman Catholic church responded to the Hindu revivalist movement and its press with a "fray of ecclesiastical journalism" in 1871, through the establishment of its own printing press in Colombogam in Jaffna. Matthias (1992) notes that the group produced their first news sheet in Tamil titled *Protests of the Catholics of Ceylon*, in 1871.

In 1876 the Catholic press launched a Tamil-English fortnightly publication the *Catholic Pathakalavan-Catholic Guardian*, which was subsequently converted to a weekly in 1880. The wave of Catholic publications in Jaffna and Colombo continued with *Sanmarkka Pothini* and *Sathya Veda Pathakalavan* – which were instrumental actively campaigning for social reforms in the North and East, and elevating the status of women and underprivileged groups (Muthulingam, 1997).

^v A Hindu sect which focuses on the centrality of lord Shiva, over Vishnu and Brahma. Sri Lankan Hindus are predominantly Sivaites.

However Muthulingam (1997) argues not all Tamil publications of the nineteenth century were ethno-nationalist in their nature, and cites *Illangai Navalar* and *Illangai Pudinalankari*, both published in 1864, as noteworthy exceptions which focused on economic and political news. The *Pudinalankari* published in Colombo by the Marikkar brothers in 1873 and *Pranddipathi* in 1870 are also cited as exceptions to the general mass of ethno-nationalist Tamil publications.

The dawn of the twentieth century saw a shift in the Tamil readership trend, with a transition from the traditionalist revivalist media to Tamil publications that were fundamentally secular in their content – a trend mirrored in the Sinhala press. These included the *Illangai Mitran* (1902), *Vijayabahu* (1911), *Balachandran* (1915) and *Janamitran* (1918). The shift in content was also reflected in some revivalist publications such as the *Udaya Tharakai*. According to Muthulingam the first part of the twentieth century saw an explosion in Tamil newspaper numbers, with fifty-three registered publications launching within the first three decades (Muthulingam, 1997).

While the Tamil press as whole moved towards the commentary of politics, their attention largely focused on trade union affairs as opposed to the wider political interests of constitutional reform and electoral politics. “Tamil Journalists – K Nathesa Iyer, in particular played a key role in providing organisational coherence to segments of the lower and middle level working class in both Colombo as well as Jaffna” (Muthulingam, 1997, p189), with K Nathesa Iyer becoming a central figure in the plantation workers’ movement which represented estate Tamil workers of Indian origin. His periodical *Deshanesan* thus became a champion of the hitherto voiceless Tamil estate workers. He later launched his own newspaper *Deshabhaktan*.

The Tamil press, which for decades had been in the hands of revivalist groups and smaller socio-political actors, eventually became overshadowed in the 1930’s by three national newspapers developed by professional newspaper producers who were rapidly carving a niche in the country’s growing newspaper industry. These included the *Virakesari* launched by a group of Colombo-based Indian Tamil traders in 1930, featuring a news focus reaching beyond the confines of Ceylon to include South Indian politics. The same year saw the birth of yet another newspaper, the *Illakeswari*, a Jaffna based newspaper that was particularly popular with the Tamil literati. The following year, DR Wijewardene, himself a bourgeoisie Sinhala Buddhist, launched his own Tamil language newspaper the *Tinakaran*, which became part of a rapidly advancing newspaper empire projecting the political and commercial objectives of Wijewardene’s newspaper company, the Lake House. Muthulingam (1997) argues that while *Tinakaran* became one of the leading newspapers in the country in a very short time, the paper failed to develop its own personality, remaining conservative and predominantly anti-socialist under Wijewardene’s shadow.

Ceylon in the electronic age: political rape of a new medium.

Ceylon’s interest in the burgeoning new technology of radio emerged at a time when the country was already immersed in a well established print media culture. While Sri Lanka can be charged with being slow to harness the power of the television, introducing it to the island only in the late 1970’s – well after the rest of Asia and Europe, it retains a pioneering position in terms of broadcast radio. Sri Lanka was among the first to tap into the groundbreaking technology of broadcast radio, and is home to the oldest radio station in South Asia – the Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation which began as Radio Ceylon, just three years after radio was inaugurated in Europe.

It could be argued that interest in radio broadcasting was sparked in the British Colonies in the early 1920’s with news that the British Broadcasting Company had progressed with plans for broadcasts throughout England. The interest in gaining access to the new medium soon gained momentum in Sri Lanka, largely due to two significant events in 1921– the commissioning of a feasibility study into

local radio broadcast and the appointment of radio enthusiast Edward Harper to the post as Chief Engineer of the Ceylon Telegraph Office.

Within just two years of his arrival Harper had galvanized support for radio broadcasts, establishing the Ceylon Wireless Club – a group comprised of well-educated British and Ceylonese radio advocates who proposed using existing wireless technology already in use within Colombo for transmissions.

Sri Lanka's foray into electronic media was modest, and was essentially an experimental broadcast made on February 22, 1924 where engineers successfully broadcast the opening ceremony of the new Young Mens' Christian Association (YMCA) building in Colombo. A few months later on June 27, 1924, radio broadcasting was officially inaugurated in Sri Lanka by then British Governor Sir William Henry Manning. The first formal radio broadcast featured a program of gramophone music transmitted from the Central Telegraph Office, purportedly using second-hand equipment from a captured WW1 German submarine and a transmitter built by Telegraph Department's own engineers.

According to Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation records, 'Colombo Radio' the pre-cursor to Radio Ceylon was finally launched after much experimentation on December 16, 1925, using a one kilowatt medium wave transmitter based in the Colombo suburb of Walikada. Within three years Ceylon had established regular radio broadcasts and by 1929 the number of radio receivers throughout the country totalled 500, growing to an estimated 10,000 over the next decade. (The Ceylon Blue Book and the statistical abstract of Ceylon 1949 as cited in Peris).

By the late 1940's radio ownership throughout Ceylon had grown – the population of just over 7 million boasted an estimated 23,000 radio receivers. There is evidence to suggest however that unlike initial elitist English patronage of the early Sri Lankan press, access to radio broadcasts was not limited to the wealthy with the financial means to purchase the new technology. The Minister for Posts and Telecommunications in Sri Lanka's first post-colonial cabinet C. Sittampalam, won popularity with middle and working class Sri Lankans after launching a program of distributing radio sets to villages all around the country and in doing so gave thousands of people access to the national broadcasts including the Buddhist pirith (prayer) services. In June 1947 the station broadcast the Adhan - Muslim prayer, for the first time during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (Ratnayake-Wattegama, 1964).

In 1947-8 dual-transmission was introduced for the first time – using medium wave for the transmission of Sinhala and Tamil broadcast services and short wave for English. With all language groups now represented the state-owned and operated radio station had the capacity to reach radio-owners of all ethnicities.

In 1949 the call sign 'Radio Ceylon' was assigned and the radio service was organised as a separate government department. In 1967 the broadcasting department was subsequently converted to a state corporation through the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation Act, No 37 of 1966. On January 5, 1967, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake declared Radio Ceylon a public corporation to be known as the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation – a title which changed to the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) after Ceylon itself went through a name change and became the Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972.

Despite pioneering radio broadcasts in the region, the radio medium unlike press was slow to assume an indigenous identity, and failed to sever ties with the BBC until the 1950's. Even as late as 1949, a year after independence Radio Ceylon was still contracting work to BBC employed British expatriates (Crusz,1998). Furthermore unlike America and Australia which enjoyed free market broadcasting, Sri Lanka followed Britain's lead in retaining a government grip on broadcast rights, holding a virtual monopoly on radio until the 1980's.

However by the seventies Sri Lanka began to venture into FM stereo radio transmission – a development which would eventually change the very nature of broadcasting in Sri Lanka and challenge the governments' monopoly on radio.

The first to take on the new market was TNL radio, a channel affiliated to Telshan Network Limited – the television station started by private television pioneer Shan Wickremesinghe, who by this stage had seen his first private TV venture, the Independent Television Network (ITN) controversially appropriated by the state under the orders of then President J.R Jayawardena in 1979 (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2000).

TNL Radio hit the airwaves on the FM band on April 2, 1993^{vi} under the leadership of Shan Wickremesinghe's brother Niraj. His father, Esmond, who wore many hats in his lifetime, was best known as the Managing Director of empire like Lake House press and as Sri Lanka's Special Diplomatic Envoy at the UN. Niraj is also the great-nephew of former President J.R Jayawardene; his maternal grandfather was DR Wijewardene, the founder of Lake House; his eldest brother, Shan, pioneered the first private television station; and his second brother Ranil is a former Prime Minister and current leader of the opposition (Rodrigo, 2005).

TNL's entry into the growing radio market was quickly followed by the Indian-owned Maharaja Organisation's English language channel *YES FM* and then, by what was to become one of the most successful private radio channels in the country, the Sinhalese language *Sirasa FM*, followed by the Tamil language *Shakthi FM* in November 1998.

A report published by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (2005) documents more than 16 state and privately owned radio stations in operation at present – of which 12 are owned by private companies. The study also suggests the private radio stations have been successful in capturing a significant segment of the audience share, with the Sinhala language stations *Sri FM* owned by the Edirisinghe group and *Sirasa* owned by Maharaja Broadcasting recording a 22.62% and 18.67% share respectively in 2003. Meanwhile the SLBC's national service *Swadeshīyā Sevayā*, the regional transmissions – *Rājarata* and *Ruhuna*, and the modernised replacement of the SLBC *Velāda Sevayā* commercial service – *Pāvana*, have recorded only a mere 16.09% which includes a 10.35% share enjoyed by *Swadeshīyā Sevayā*. Meanwhile the SLBC's Tamil service *Thendral* recorded 3.77%, while the Asian Broadcasting Corporation's *Soorian* and the Maharaja owned *Shakthi* Tamil stations both rated higher with *Soorian* capturing 4.25% of the audience share and *Shakthi* reaching a staggering 11.21%.

However Sri Lanka's privately owned radio and television stations have limited transmission capabilities, broadcasting only on the FM band, while the SLBC by comparison broadcasts island-wide on medium wave, short wave and FM bands. Another restriction on privately owned commercial radio operation is that the licensing of radio frequencies remains in government control. Yet despite their broad coverage capacity and their 10 radio channels and five regional stations, the SLBC is losing ground in metropolitan areas where its channels compete directly with private interests.

Nalaka Gunawardene (2003) suggests that over the last decade state-owned media has become “completely sidelined” by the private FM channels – all of which have tapped into the public's

^{vi} The station transmitted on 101.7 FM was officially commissioned on July 23, 1993 (www.lamka.net/tnl/)

increasing interest in and demand for infotainment, easily digestible news broadcasts and contemporary music programming. The advent of private media has also provide a media platforms for political ideologies previously limited to niche ordinance.

Ironically, SLBC's continued strength, namely as a leading source for state driven political, economic and social issues, is also its weakness. As Gunawardene claims; "Over the years, successive governments have misused the station for political and state propaganda. Inconsequential and boring speeches of politicians were broadcast in full," resulting in the growth and expansion of more competitive and dynamic stations which have become more appealing, particularly to younger consumers. Stations such as *Sirisa FM* have tapped into the state media's weaknesses and since the mid 1990's have developed a series of news and current affairs-based programs which provide a credible and modern alternative to SLBC newscasts and talkback. "Private channels moved closer to their audiences by presenting news in colloquial and friendly Sinhala. Not so SLBC, which insists on using an imperious and archaic version of the language." (Gunawardene, 2003)

With private radio stations fast encroaching on the SLBC's traditional audience the state broadcaster has been forced to enter the race for an audience share, at times attempting to mimic the style and format of private radio channels. In one such metamorphosis the Sri Lankan government's broadcasting policymakers introduced *Pavana* a new youth channel^{vii} purportedly modelled on Germany's very successful *Eins Live*. The new channel replaced the existing *Velāda Seyayā*, the SLBC Sinhala Commercial Service (Priu.gov.lk,xxxx), but received strong criticism from former SLBC commercial service broadcasters who claim the station has alienated the audience because "listeners didn't expect the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's *"Pavana"* to copy broadcasts of private radio stations". They also argued "the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is the people's radio. It is the national radio station. The National Service and the Commercial Service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation is like the bark and the tree. One cannot survive without the other. *Pavana* is entirely different from both services," (Sunday Observer, February 10, 2002).

Meanwhile community radio analyst MJR David (1981) claims the new privately owend FM stations have an urban elite orientation that excludes or sidelines grassroots audiences. This, coupled with the fact that those in rural areas enjoy little access to truly audience-driven radio because of transmission limitations, should provide a fertile environment for community-run radio stations.

Surprisingly however Sri Lanka does not have a extensive community radio industry and Gunewardene (2003) suggest the reason is 'political'. He notes that since 1992, four successive governments have refused to grant broadcast licenses to non-profit, non-governmental or cooperative groups; including the country's largest development NGO – Sarvodaya. The suggestion is that the government fears the political agendas of some of these groups, particularly those which may take an anti-government stand on social and political issues such as human rights abuses, corruption, welfare policy and ethnic issues.

That is not to say that community radio has not been trialled. Two groundbreaking projects have met with considerable success – the *Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR)* established in 1981, and its offshoot *Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project*, established in 1991. Both of these stations were developed with foreign aid and the support of UNESCO, and were designed to engage local rural communities. In MCR's case Mahaweli Radio was to broadcast in communities involved in the government's ambitious irrigation scheme to divert the Mahaweli River^{viii}. Meanwhile the *Kothmale Community Radio Project* set in Sri Lanka's hill country was designed use radio broadcasts as a

^{vii} on March 22, 2001

^{viii} www.communityradionetwork.org

conduit between the local community and the new technology of the internet. But while these stations were considered “community radio” in terms of their content and philosophy, they relied on the goodwill and partnership of the SLBC to survive. UNESCO's Regional Communication Advisor for Asia Wijayananda Jayaweera, writes “in the true sense, Kothmale was not a radio station owned and run by the community. The community radio station was managed under the state owned public service broadcasting service...” (2001). In the politically-charged media environment of Sri Lanka government radio, the degree of independence that may be granted to ‘community radio’ is therefore somewhat questionable.

A report published by the Sri Lankan think-tank, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), in conjunction with the Denmark-based International Media Support (2005) notes that the *Mahaweli Community Radio*, which included three key community radio ventures administered and run by the government had never been *truly* independent, and argues its contents had been kept “artificially non-political” through a government policy which prevents any criticism of the government.

By 1990-91 with funding exhausted and the SLBC support of the project waning MCR was struggling to stay afloat. At the time the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters’ General Secretary Evelyn Foy observed: “An evaluation of the current state of MCR by the local producers raised a number of problems; the difficulty of keeping resources intended for MCR^{ix}... and (the) centralization [sic] of decision-making in the capital and in the head offices of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting System” (David, 2001). Felix Librero meanwhile suggests that the problems facing MCR may have had more to do with a broader Asian attitudes to broadcasting than inherent problems within Sri Lanka, claiming that Asian broadcasting in general was “originally organised as a means of propagating government thinking and (was) designed simply to inform the people” (David 2001). David adds that under such a system it is “inevitable” that broadcasting which promotes increased two-way dialogue between the broadcasters and its audience would face opposition.

Despite the difficulties of the original MCR project however, the CPA (2005) reports that three Mahaweli Community Radio stations remain operational, including the Girandurukotte station started in 1986, Mahailuppallama (1987), and Kothmale (1988). The Girandurukotte station located in the Badulla District, transmits for three hours in Sinhala every day reaching listeners in Badulla and Polonnaruwa Districts, although its reach continues to be limited by the low transmission capability of old and outdated equipment. The Mahailuppallama station located in the Anuradhapura District also transmits for three hours in Sinhala and carries its own programs, particularly focusing on agriculture and the related needs of the region’s farming community. Like its Girandurukotte counterpart the station runs a very low-tech operation which has received computers only recently. Of the three stations run under the *Mahaweli Community Radio* project the Nuwara Eliya District-based *Kothmale radio* remains the most prolific producer of radio, transmitting for 12 hours^x a day in both Sinhala and Tamil. Its transmissions reach more than 60 small communities in the region in addition to the Nawalapitiya, Gampola and Hatton towns. The station currently generates approximately Rs. 0.15million (USD 1,433.86) per month in advertising revenue. However, financial management remains with the SLBC (CPA, 2005).

Two other ‘community’ radio projects operate outside the *Mahaweli Community Radio* network, these include the Polonnaruwa District-based Sinhala language *Pulathisiravaya* radio station which transmits eight hours daily to parts of Polonnaruwa and Medawachchiya in the north-central province and Ampara in the eastern province. *Pulathisiravaya* launched in 1998, in the multi-ethnic war-affected areas in the North and the East, also remains under government control.

Meanwhile *Uva radio*, the latest addition to Sri Lanka’s community radio network, is widely considered “the most independent and influential community station in the country thus far” (CPA,

^{ix} The resources were siphoned into SLBL coffers.

^x The station which began as an irregular transmission around three days a week for a few hours each day, had extended its broadcast to 8 hours a day in 1999

2005, p14). The station, which transmits in both Sinhala and Tamil for 18 hours a day reaching audiences in the Uva, Eastern, Southern and Sabaragamuwa Provinces, was set up with UNDP funding. It is aimed at “increased community involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating (the UNDP’s) poverty reduction programs” (CPA, 2005, pp 14-15), but once again fall short of being truly independent and is jointly run by the Uva provincial council (local government) and the SLBC. However unlike other community projects in the island, *Uva radio* involves members of the community not merely as content providers but also as broadcasters in both Sinhala and Tamil programming, and the station’s 20-strong multi-ethnic staff have received training in computer-aided production techniques.

Interestingly however the one radio station that has most effectively circumvented state involvement is perhaps the one station Sri Lankan governments of both major political persuasions have unsuccessfully attempted to curb – the *Voice of Tigers* (VoT), the official radio station of the armed Sri Lankan rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The *Voice of Tigers* first hit the airwaves in 1990 broadcasting from a mobile transmitter. It has since become the ultimate anti-government station broadcasting news and information from a distinctly pro-rebel perspective. While their predominant broadcast is in Tamil the station also broadcasts a Sinhala language news service targeting government troops stationed along the fringes of Tiger held regions in the North and East. In 2002 as the LTTE and Sri Lankan Government entered peace-talks, the government took the unprecedented step of granting VoT a temporary broadcasting licence and a legitimate FM frequency, and also permitted the LTTE to import more than US \$10,000 worth of radio equipment on the proviso that the station be based in Kilinochchi^{xi}. The Tiger radio station also continues to be one of the main sources of information for local and international media which regularly quote news items broadcast on *Voice of Tiger*, as part of their own Sri Lankan coverage.

Television: the new medium.

Sri Lanka was latecomer to television. It was first introduced in 1979, skipping the black and white stage all together and launching in colour, well after the technology had become part of everyday life in Europe and the US.

But unlike radio, when television first went to air on April 15 that year, it was facilitated not by state authorities, but by private entrepreneur Shan Wickremasinghe with support from his cousin Anil Wijewardene and American friend Bob Christy. The first television station *Independent Television Network (ITN)* was initially launched from a single room at Pannipitiya on the outskirts of Colombo, with a limited broadcast range of a mere 30km.

Wickremasinghe however was not entirely distanced from the country’s political environment, his great uncle Junius Richard (JR) Jayewardene was the country’s president at the time and it is fair to say that ITN was launched with what Gunaratne describes as the “blessing of the UNP (United National Party)” – the ruling party at the time (Gunaratne 2001). ITN’s ‘independence’ however was short-lived. Within a few months, the Jayewardene government which had purportedly supported Wickremasinghe’s ambitious project, took control of the station under an extraordinary government gazette (no 3914) dated June 5, 1979.

Gunaratne claims the takeover stemmed from a disagreement between the government and the businessmen, but Peiris (1997) suggests it was “probably the well known potency of the impact of television that prompted the government to impose direct controls”. Less than two years later the Sri

^{xi} <http://www.hinduonnet.com/stories/2002121602411200.htm>

Lankan government created the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation – a second state-operated station, established under the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation Act of 1982, commencing transmission on February 15, 1982. This well resourced television station built with Japanese government assistance, soon became the dominant television station – relegating *ITN* to the position of a minor station with limited reach. Both *Rupavahini* and the *ITN* continue to be state controlled.

Television remained a state monopoly for another decade, until 1992, when the government allowed private investors to enter the field under the control and supervision of the SLRC. Six private channels were subsequently in operation by 1998, included *Maharaja Television*, which has now been rechristened *MTV* and its Sinhala counter part *Sirasa*; *Swarnavahini* and *ETV* – both owned by the EAP Edirisinghe group of companies; *TNL* and *Dynavision*.

MTV and its subsidiary channels are owned by the Maharaja group of companies, which traces its history in Sri Lanka back to the late 1930's in the years leading up to World War II. Two friends Subramaniam Mahadevan and Sinnathamby Rajandram, employees of the American trading house Dodge & Seymour, committed their life savings to acquire the shares of the company when the owners left Sri Lanka in 1939. The various companies in the group were restructured, and on April 1, 1967, The Maharaja Organisation Limited (TMOL) was incorporated (www.maharaja.lk, 2005). *MTV* Channel (Pvt) Ltd was set up by TMOL in 1992, with the first broadcast going to air in September the same year. *MTV* launched as a joint venture project with Singapore Telecom, until in 1998, Singapore Telecom divested its shares^{xii}. In its initial stages, *MTV* telecast primarily news and English language programmes. In June 1998, *Sirasa TV* – the Sinhala language channel, commenced telecasts and was soon followed by *Shakthi TV* – the Tamil channel, in November of the same year.

ETV (consisting of channels *ETV 1* and *2*) was an entertainment and world news channel founded in the mid-1990's by E.A.P. Edirisingha (Pvt) Ltd – a group of companies which own Swarnamahal, one of Colombo's largest jewellery businesses, and E.A.P. Edirisingha Pawn Brokers. In 1998, *ETV 1* became *Swarnawahini* and *ETV 2* became *ETV*^{xiii}.

Despite the arrival of new commercial, and arguably better-financed television enterprises however, state television still enjoys a privileged position. With the state still in control of allocating television transmission frequencies and transmission licenses, the government media holds the advantage of retaining those frequencies with the widest coverage. Even early in Sri Lanka's television history with only a transmitting station on Mount Pidurutalagala and two sub-transmitting stations in Kandy and Kokavil (the latter destroyed by the LTTE in July 1990), SLRC was able to provide its services to 84% of the population (Gunaratne, 2001).

More recently a CPA (2005) report showed that of an ordinance polled in October 2002, the state-owned *Rupavahini* reached 97% of the respondents, while *ITN* reached 92.2% and its subsidiary the *eye channel* 84.7%. In contrast *TNL* reached only 65.2% of the respondents, while *MTV* and *Shakthi* reached even a smaller portion of the audience, recording a mere 51.3%. The same survey showed *Dynavision* reached 25.3% of the audience while *ETV* reached 29.6%. However, the real challenge to state-owned television came from *Swarnawahini* and *Sirasa*, with *Swarnawahini* reaching 80.3% of the audience and *Sirasa* 77.7% – both falling marginally only short of the state broadcasters.

^{xii} In the past few years another multi-national company - International Media Management - has also invested in *MTV*

^{xiii} In 1998 *ETV* traded BBC World for Sky News.

While the relaxation in government media policy, and the willingness to relinquish the electronic media monopoly, could be attributed to a natural progression of the state's thinking on media freedom in the early 1990's, it is also plausible to assume the decision was more closely associated with political changes at the time – notably the change of government from President Ranasinghe Premadasa to Dingiri Banda Wijetunge.

In this context it should be noted that the ideological changes in media policy of the Wijetunge government, were directly in contrast with the Premadasa government's policy of media control. Senadhira (1996) argues that President Premadasa held an iron grip on the media, a policy demonstrated in the president's use of media during an opposition bid to impeach him in August 1991. He claims the President had been given 90 minutes of television air-time to speak on the resolution of impeachment, while the sponsors of the resolution, including Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) opposition leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Premadasa's own party member and one-time frontbencher Lalith Athulathmudali, were given no air time at all.

While the Premadasa government's official position on media control seemed to relax during the latter part of his presidency, few *real* changes in media freedom were seen until his successor Wijetunge took the reigns of national leadership. After Premadasa was assassinated on May 1, 1993 Prime Minister Wijetunga took over the presidency and initiated significant steps to tone down media control, one of which was to withdraw Premadasa's order for the compulsory telecast of the state television corporation's news bulletin on all TV channels simultaneously. Shortly after, the newly appointed Director General of *Rupavahini* Sunil Sarath Perera, with the backing of the President, instructed the news team to telecast meetings and rallies of opposition parties – this was followed by a fresh approach to programming at *Rupavahini* which included programs featuring radical artists and poets, and popular discussions. Thus, according to Senadhira (1996), the credibility of state TV was restored.

In 1994 the People's Alliance (PA), a composite political party made up of the SLFP and left-wing allies pledged a free media as part of their parliamentary elections campaign, but Senadhira (1996) argues that once the party won the parliamentary poll, its leader, the newly appointed Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga was quick to harness and abuse the power of the media her party now controlled, in the lead up to the presidential elections which were to be held just three months later in October 1994. During the presidential campaign Kumaratunga refused to broadcast the funeral of murdered^{xiv} UNP presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake, a was customary, despite making arrangements to accord him state funeral. Kumaratunga campaign policymakers argued that a live telecast of the funeral would have given valuable exposure to his widow Srimala Dissanayake who was nominated as presidential candidate in his stead. The funeral did however make it to air through a mobile unit broadcasting unit operated by the pro-UNP station TNL.

Over the next few years Kumaratunga continued to try and reign in the media, and was quoted more than once arguing that while press freedom was necessary, the media could not be given the 'freedom the wild ass'. Kumaratunga also removed Sunil Sarath Perera from the *Rupavahini*'s top job, which was subsequently filled by Peoples Alliance supporter and Kumaratunga confidante Vasantha Raja, who ironically in later years became a key supporter of the anti-government Tamil separatist movement.

^{xiv} he was assassinated by the LTTE.

Conclusion:

Of the 170 years that news technologies have operated in Sri Lanka, it has only been in the last two decades that the monopolistic grip of the politico-media elite has been truly challenged. The advent of electronic media, owned by interests diverse from traditional media administrators, coupled with opportunities for international ownership and a reliance on commercial rather than state funding are starting to change the country's media environment.

Print media particularly, still largely the stronghold of the 88 year old Wijewardene nexus, is not only facing competition from new, albeit small, operators within its own medium, but perhaps more pressingly, has been joined in the presentation of news by the dynamic new technologies of television and radio. These new players, while often restricted by government-controlled licensing policies and physical reach, have quickly gained popular support from the Sri Lankan media consumers.

The question however is whether these changes in news technologies and ownership are also truly changing news agendas and whether ideologies distinct from those espoused by the traditional elite are finding fertile ground in these new, independently owned and operated electronic media.

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