



REUTERS  
INSTITUTE for the  
STUDY of  
JOURNALISM

**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper**  
**University of Oxford**

**MEDIA FREEDOM IN POST WAR SRI LANKA  
AND ITS IMPACT ON THE RECONCILIATION  
PROCESS**

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Trinity Term 2012

Sponsor: BBC Media Action



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

First and foremost, I would like to thank James Painter, Head of the Journalism Programme and the entire staff of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for their help and support. I am grateful to BBC New Media Action for sponsoring me, and to its former Programme Officer Tirthankar Bandyopadhyay, for letting me know about this wonderful opportunity and encouraging me all the way. My supervisor Dr Sujit Sivasundaram of Cambridge University provided academic insights which were very valuable for my research paper. I place on record my appreciation to all those who participated in the survey and interviews. I would like to thank my colleagues in the BBC, Chandana Keerthi Bandara, Charles Haviland, Wimalasena Hewage, Saroj Pathirana, Poopalaratnam Seevagan, Ponniah Manickavasagam and my good friend Karunakaran (former Colombo correspondent of the BBC Tamil Service) for their help. Special thanks to my parents and sisters and all my fellow journalist fellows. Finally to Marianne Landzettel (BBC World Service News) for helping me by patiently proof reading and revising this paper.

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# 1 Overview

Sri Lanka's quarter-century-long conflict with Tamil separatists has divided communities and polarised the media. Around 100,000 people died in the war and over a million fled to other countries. Both the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil Tigers used the media for propaganda purposes and resorted to violence to silence and suppress the free flow of information. Journalists working for Sinhalese, English and Tamil media were killed during the war. This includes a BBC Jaffna reporter Mylvaganam Nimalarajan<sup>1</sup>. Scores of journalists were intimidated, abducted and imprisoned. According to an Amnesty report published in 2010, at least 15 journalists have been killed since 2006. Sri Lanka figures near the bottom of press freedom indices. This is why Sri Lanka is often described as one of the most dangerous place for journalists<sup>2</sup>.

As a producer in the BBC Tamil service, during the final months of Sri Lankan civil war, I used to get conflicting version of events and different sets of casualty figures almost every day. On 13 May 2009 the only functioning hospital in the war zone was attacked<sup>3</sup>. Reports from the war zone put the death toll at over 50. The Pro Tamil Tiger website Tamilnet said more than 100 people were killed<sup>4</sup>. It also published photos and videos taken after the attacks. The Sri Lankan government denied attacking the hospital. But later reports by the UN and other agencies, which came months after the end of the war, have clearly states that the hospital in the war zone was repeatedly targeted<sup>5</sup>. During that time the Sri Lankan government denied independent access to the war zone. So media organisations including the BBC usually gave equal space to both the government and the Tamil versions of the story and added a caveat saying the claims couldn't be independently verified. In the case of the bombed hospital I spoke to both the sides. The doctor in the make shift hospital claimed dozens were killed in the attack. But the army spokesman denied attacking the hospital. In this attack, I was not able to speak to the wounded or the relatives of those who got killed or to any other eyewitness. In the midst of allegations and denials we were unable to adequately report the suffering of those trapped in the war zone.

To make the matter worse, the government propagated a "zero civilian casualty theory"<sup>6</sup>. Even when confronted with the photos and videos showing the dead bodies of children and women, officials refused to engage with the media and instead termed this as propaganda of the other side. The government kept repeating for many months that no civilians were killed. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the LTTE too prevented free movement of people. Unlike the rebels of Libya or Syria it showed no interest in helping journalists get into the LTTE controlled areas.

In the past the Sri Lankan government used the civil war to justify measures to curb press freedom and individual liberties. It even borrowed phrases like "You are with us or against us"<sup>7</sup>. Those who were critical of the government were branded as "terrorist lovers" or "tiger agents". After its

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11568133>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2007/12/071218\\_dangerous\\_press.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2007/12/071218_dangerous_press.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/8048087.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8048087.stm)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=29351>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri\\_Lanka/POE\\_Report\\_Full.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/POE_Report_Full.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20100912\\_01](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20100912_01)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdhuM9zTovE>

successful military campaign which wiped out the LTTE in May 2009, the Sri Lankan government gradually relaxed many restrictions placed on the media and withdrew all censorship.

In the post war period the killing has stopped. But physical attacks against journalists continue to take place. There were instances of offices of news organisation being attacked by mobs in the capital Colombo. In recent months the government has put in place a number of measures that aim to curb internet freedom. After the elimination of the LTTE, media activists say they are under threat from the state. Ministers and officials often intimidate journalists. Independent journalists have been threatened via the state media.

This research aims to study the state of media freedom after the end of the war in Sri Lanka and how the lack of media freedom has a direct impact on the media's ability to play a meaningful role in the post-war reconciliation efforts. This paper attempts to understand what kind of hurdles a reporter has to overcome to gather accurate information while reporting a controversial story.

#### Research Questions:

1. How do journalists feel about their own safety and the overall media environment in the country?
2. Do journalists feel they are able to play their role in post war reconciliation efforts?

To get an answer to the research questions, a survey involving 20 Sri Lankan journalists was conducted for this paper. The findings will be discussed in chapter 2.

Due to the enormously high casualty figures and the prolonged nature of the Sri Lankan conflict very few personal stories were covered in depth. Threats and denial of access to places and information has resulted in the media not reporting certain events and not mentioning certain people in the post war period. Chapter 3 will examine the interaction between the victims of war and the media, based on the personal experience of two women. In the fourth chapter the impact created by the Channel 4 documentaries on Sri Lanka will be analysed. Chapter 4 will also examine how Tamil groups in the diaspora are increasingly using the western media to confront the Sri Lankan government and the new strategies adopted by the Sri Lankan government to deal with international media.

Numerous Sri Lankan journalists living in exile have started their own websites. Some are collaborating with the mainstream media. Chapter 5 will examine the impact of those websites. It will also look into steps brought in by the Sri Lankan government to regulate the news websites. The final chapter contains a summary of the findings of this study.

This researcher conducted a number of interviews by phone, email and Skype to reach out to diverse groups. The research paper also draws on the reports of human rights groups and media rights organisations. Direct quotes which are not attributed to any source are from interviews conducted by the author.

## 2 Challenges to Press Freedom

### 2.1 Background

Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948. The island nation has a population of about 20 million consisting of a Sinhalese majority (74%) and a native Tamil minority (12%)<sup>8</sup>. Most of the Sinhalese follow Theravada Buddhism. The majority of Tamils are Hindus. Christians are found across the linguistic divide. The majority of Muslims speak Tamil as their first language but identify themselves as a separate group. Tamils of Indian origin constitute 5 per cent of the population and live in central Sri Lanka. They figure at the bottom of the socioeconomic development indicators. Sri Lanka also has a small aboriginal community called Veddhas.

Post-independence successive governments implemented policies which promoted the Sinhala language and Buddhism, but both measures fuelled discontent among the Tamils. The government also brought in policies aimed at decreasing the number of Tamils in government services and enrolment in higher education. In 1978, Sri Lanka switched to the executive presidential form of government. This move disempowered parliament and took away the political leverage of minority political parties. As a result of systematic discrimination, youngsters gravitated towards the armed struggle in the late 1970s. Massive communal riots in 1983 also played a significant part in radicalising Tamil society. Between 1983 and 1987, over a dozen Tamil militant groups became active and - with the tacit backing of India - engaged in a guerrilla war.

Neighbouring India, whose Tamil speaking population is three and a half times bigger than the total population of Sri Lanka, intervened in 1987 and forced the Sri Lankan government to sign the Indo-Lanka peace accord. It paved the way for the two provinces with a Tamil majority, the Northern and the Eastern province, to be merged. The main Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) spurned the proposal and opted to fight the Indian troops who came to Sri Lanka on a peace keeping mission as part of the peace accord. But the Sri Lankan government did not devolve powers to the North Eastern province as the Indian government had envisaged.

The withdrawal of the Indian army in 1990 triggered a fresh round of fighting between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE. After more than 10 years of war and failed peace talks, Norway succeeded in bringing about a ceasefire agreement in 2002<sup>9</sup>. The period of relative peace lasted for about four years during which both parties - despite many rounds of peace talks - failed to reach a mutually acceptable solution. This period also saw the rise of Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was elected president in November 2005. After assuming office, Mahinda Rajapaksa, a known hardliner, appointed his younger brother, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, as Defence Secretary and embarked on a massive military expansion. Undeterred by the civilian casualties and international pressure, the government carried out a full-fledged military offensive and wiped out the Tamil Tigers in May 2009.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Sri-Lanka.html>

<sup>9</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/1836198.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1836198.stm)

The LTTE was a well-trained and motivated force. It boasted not just an army and a navy but has the distinction of the first rebel force in the world to also have had its own air force. It used suicide bombers to assassinate scores of political opponents including a Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, and the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The LTTE built a massive international network to mobilise financial resources and to procure arms. Jane's Defence Weekly estimates the annual international revenue of the LTTE at between US\$200 million to US\$300 million<sup>10</sup>. The LTTE was sceptical about Tamils achieving equal political rights within a united Sri Lanka and therefore fought for a separate Tamil state. For over a decade it controlled close to 25 per cent of the Sri Lankan land area and almost presided over a de facto state<sup>11</sup>. Yet it failed to capitalise on its military prowess to achieve a political settlement. The LTTE was accused of committing many human rights violations including the recruitment of child soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

During the final phase of the war, the Sri Lankan government banned journalists from travelling to the war zone and imposed regulations to stifle freedom of expression. The government cut all phone connections barring one to the only make shift hospital which was functioning under constant bombardment in the war zone<sup>13</sup>. It also forced out NGOs and the UN. Due to this, human rights groups termed the final phase of the conflict as the "War without Witness"<sup>14</sup>.

Supporters of the government argue that it will take some time for a nation which has suffered such a long period of civil war, to make tangible progress. The government has resettled the vast majority of the 300,000 people displaced during the war. It has released most of the former Tamil Tigers combatants captured by the security forces. At the same time, there has been little progress in reaching a political settlement with the Tamil elected representatives.

## 2.2 State of the Media

Sri Lankan media are available in English, Sinhala and Tamil across various platforms. There are over a dozen newspapers, around three dozen TV channels and more than 40 radio stations. The state media have a strong presence across all media platforms<sup>15</sup>. The Sri Lankan press traces its origins to the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The first paper, the Colombo Journal, was started at the insistence of the then colonial governor on 1 January 1832 and within two years it was closed for being critical of the government.<sup>16</sup> The first Tamil paper was started a decade later in Jaffna by the Christian missionaries. The paper named Udaya Tharakai (Morning Star) was published by the American Missionary press in Manipay from 1841.

The Sinhala press too traces its origin to Christian missionaries. The missionary periodical Masika Thagga containing biblical stories made its start in 1832. The Kandy Sinhala Tract Society publication,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.janes.com/products/janes/defence-security-report.aspx?id=1065926725>

<sup>11</sup>

[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/document/papers/president\\_speech\\_parliament\\_defeatofLTTE.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/document/papers/president_speech_parliament_defeatofLTTE.htm)

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_21990.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_21990.html)

<sup>13</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8045135.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8045135.stm)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/science-for-human-rights/sri-lanka>

<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media\\_of\\_Sri\\_Lanka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_of_Sri_Lanka)

<sup>16</sup> Colonials, bourgeoisies and media dynasties: A case study of Sri Lanka – Linda Brady

Lanka Nidhanaya, edited by Rev Robert Spence in 1840 is believed to be the second Sinhala periodical produced in colonial Ceylon. Others date the origin of the Sinhala press only to 1860 and the publication of Lankaloka<sup>17</sup>. Buddhist monks too started many newspapers during this time to challenge the virtual monopoly enjoyed by the missionaries. The Asian Communication Handbook 2008 notes that during the initial stages the English press exhibited a pro-Western, pro- Christian bias whereas the Sinhalese press showed a nationalistic and pro- Buddhist viewpoint. It observes that the early Tamil publications were religious and ethno-nationalist in form and character

The twentieth century saw the consolidation and expansion of the press in all three languages. At the time of independence, Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL) established itself as a dominant player. The ANCL, better known as "Lake House publications" because of the colonial mansion that served as its headquarters, was started in 1918 by D. R. Wijewardene. To undercut its influence, the governments of S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake and his widow, Sirimavo Bandaranayake, encouraged the publication of Dawasa, a daily newspaper in Sinhala which quickly became the second largest daily newspaper, based on circulation. Nevertheless the government nationalised the Lake House group in 1973<sup>18</sup>. It still remains a powerful media player and brings out daily newspapers in all three languages. The capital Colombo is the centre of the English and Sinhala press. The Tamil press operates from Jaffna and Colombo.

Sri Lanka was the first country in Asia to start radio transmissions. Experimental transmissions started in 1923 and the first radio station, Colombo Radio, was launched on 16th December 1925. It is now known as the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation<sup>19</sup>. Until 1984, radio was a government monopoly. Sri Lanka's first TV channel was started by private individuals in 1979. It was acquired by the government within six months. Private channels started operating from 1992.<sup>20</sup> Many private TV channels have now emerged, but not all of them carry news bulletins. Tamil Tigers ran their own radio and TV stations in northern Sri Lanka and a formidable media network overseas.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.3 Impact of the War on the Media

Sri Lanka has a long history of using violence to suppress the media. Richard de Zoysa, who worked for the Inter Press Service was the first journalist in Sri Lanka to be abducted and killed in February 1990. His father was Sinhalese, his mother Tamil. He was picked up from his home and on the very next day his bullet riddled body was recovered from the seashore (February 18, 1990) near the capital Colombo<sup>22</sup>. Richard's body was identified by another journalist, Taraki or Darmarathnam Sivaram. Sivaram suffered the same fate on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2005 - he was abducted and killed. His body was recovered near the parliament building<sup>23</sup>. He was the then editor of Tamilnet.

Richard's mother relentlessly pursued her son's case and identified several suspects including a top ranking police officer. The top two suspects were killed along with the then president Ranasinghe

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.pressreference.com/Sa-Sw/Sri-Lanka.htm>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.pressreference.com/Sa-Sw/Sri-Lanka.html>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.slbc.lk/index.php/about-slbc>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.pressreference.com/Sa-Sw/Sri-Lanka.html>

<sup>21</sup> The Tigers Abroad How the LTTE Diaspora Supports the Conflict in Sri Lanka Dr. Peter Chalk

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/richard-was-murdered-22-years-ago-remembering-richard/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=14768>

Premadasa in a LTTE suicide attack in 1993<sup>24</sup>. The other defendants were acquitted after a prolonged trial lasting till the end of 2005. The same pattern was repeated in subsequent killings. The government would express concern and promise to bring the killers to justice whenever a journalist was killed. But ultimately no one would be punished.

In the beginning of 2006, a Tamil reporter, Subramaniam Sugitharajah, was killed a few weeks after he published evidence that disproved the government's version of events regarding the death of five students. He was working as a part time reporter for the Tamil paper Sudar Oli. On January 2 2006, five Tamil students were killed in Trincomalee. The authorities said these five men were planning an attack on the army and got killed in a botched attempt to throw a grenade. But Sugitharajah published photographs of the dead bodies which indicated death through gunshot wounds. On 24 January 2006 he was killed by unidentified gunmen<sup>25</sup>.

Tamil militant groups also used violence against the media. From its inception, the LTTE did not tolerate criticism. It even forced the closure of a newspaper, Eelanadu, in Sri Lanka<sup>26</sup>. In 1993 the well-known Tamil journalist D.B.S. Jayaraj was attacked by Tiger supporters in Canada. D.B.S. Jayaraj sustained head injuries in that attack. A few years later his Tamil paper was closed because of the continued intimidation.<sup>27</sup> The BBC's Jaffna correspondent Mylvaganam Nimalarajan is believed to have been killed by a Tamil militant group<sup>28</sup>. The Committee to Protect Journalists says 25 journalists were killed in Sri Lanka between 1992 and 2009<sup>29</sup>. Most of these killings took place between 2004 and 2009. Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka states that 39 were killed or disappeared since the present government took office in late 2005<sup>30</sup>. (This figure includes non-editorial staff.) An Amnesty International report states 14 journalists were killed since 2006<sup>31</sup>. Most of them were Tamil journalists.

Since the end of the war, there has been a notable drop in terms of physical attacks against journalists. No case of death has been reported, but one cartoonist, Prageeth Eknaligoda, went missing. Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa has claimed that "Eknaligoda had himself disappeared".<sup>32</sup> The RSF (Reporters Without Borders) has named Rajapaksa as what it calls 'one of the predators of press freedom'<sup>33</sup>. Sri Lanka's Attorney-General Mohan Peiris claimed before a UN panel that he believed Prageeth Eknaligoda was alive and living abroad. But when testifying before a court in Colombo in June 2012 he claimed he had no idea of Eknaligoda's whereabouts<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/richard-was-murdered-22-years-ago-remembering-richard/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://cpj.org/killed/2006/subramaniam-sugitharajah.php>

<sup>26</sup> Asian Communication Handbook 2008

<sup>27</sup> <http://rrj.ca/m4074/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11568133>

<sup>29</sup> <http://cpj.org/killed/asia/sri-lanka/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/killed-media-workers>

<sup>31</sup>

<http://takeaction.amnestyusa.org/siteapps/advocacy/ActionItem.aspx?c=6oJCLQPAJiJUG&b=6645049&aid=13667>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,RSF,,LKA,,4dc2b525c,0.html>

<sup>33</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8657779.stm>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-18332987>

Two senior journalists were attacked during this period. Poddala Jayatha was working for the state run Sinhala newspaper “Dinamina” when he was abducted, badly beaten and thrown into a pool of mud by unknown assailants on 1 June 2009. He was also the general secretary of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) and a key activist for the Free Media Movement (FMM) in Sri Lanka<sup>35</sup>. A few days before the attack, an editorial in his paper Dinamina called for the “stoning and expelling (of) professional journalists who grow beards”<sup>36</sup>. (Jayantha sports a beard. Dinamina is state owned and takes instructions from the government. This may explain why the newspaper has written an article targeting its own staff) In March 2012, a controversial Sri Lankan Minister, Mervyn Silva, claimed he was the one who “chased him out of the country”<sup>37</sup>. Poddala, now living in exile, believes the instruction to harm him came from defence officials.<sup>38</sup> On 29 July 2011, the editor of Tamil newspaper Uthyan, Gnanasundaram Kuhananthan, was attacked and left for dead.

Sporadic attacks of media offices too continued to take place. Fourteen months after the end of the Sri Lankan war, the office of the privately owned Sinhala TV and radio station Siyatha was bombed. Its owner, who was once very close to the president, fled the country after reports emerged that he had also funded the opposition presidential candidate and former army commander, General Sarath Fonseka<sup>39</sup>. On 31st Jan 2011, the office of the website Lankaenews.com was set on fire.<sup>40</sup> In November 2011, the Sri Lankan government blocked web access to Lankaenews.com and four other websites saying “they committed character assassination and insulted people including key political leaders”<sup>41</sup>.

Officially a journalist can travel to any place in Sri Lanka with the exception of Nandikadal where the final battle of the war took place. But in reality many more restrictions are in place.<sup>42</sup> The US based NGO Freedom House has classified Sri Lanka as “Not Free”. It further says many journalists assume that their phone and online communications are monitored<sup>43</sup>.

Sri Lanka was placed at a respectable rank of 51 among the 139 nations surveyed by the RSF in its first press freedom report in 2002<sup>44</sup>. As table 1 show, after that its rank dropped, and RSF still categorises Sri Lanka as one of the most dangerous places for journalists to work<sup>45</sup>.

Year	Sri Lanka’s rank	Number of countries surveyed
2007	156	169
2008	165	173
2009	162	175
2010	158	178

<sup>35</sup> <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/710>

<sup>36</sup> <http://asiapacific.ifj.org/assets/docs/236/115/1d464ec-8892c73.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17491832>

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2012/03/120325\\_poddala\\_jayantha.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2012/03/120325_poddala_jayantha.shtml)

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10813574>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12322916>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.lankapress.com/?p=751>

<sup>42</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8190119.stm>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/sri-lanka>

<sup>44</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2002,297.html>

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/01/080102\\_rsf\\_press.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/01/080102_rsf_press.shtml)

Table 1: RSF Press Freedom Index

However, there have been some positive developments. On May 3, 2010 the Sri Lankan President pardoned a noted Tamil journalist, Jeyaprakash Tisainayagam, who had been sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment on charges of supporting terrorism<sup>46</sup>. Tisainayagam was arrested in March 2008. His release came a year after US President Obama in one of his speeches described J. S. Tisainayagam, “as a symbol of the oppression of the media<sup>47</sup>”.

Also in 2010, on 15 April, the government allowed the Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) to rebroadcast the BBC World Service’s Tamil, English and Sinhala language programmes in its FM broadcasts. The BBC had been forced to suspend its programmes on 10th February 2009, following deliberate and regular interferences in its broadcasts which violate the terms of its contract<sup>48</sup>. Stories critical of the government were censored and instead music would be played. The BBC noted 17 instances of interference with BBC Tamil service programmes and eight similar instances involving BBC Sinhala broadcasts between 27 November 2008 and early January 2009.<sup>49</sup>

The World Service is generally known for bringing global news to listeners at home. But in Sri Lanka it is considered the broadcaster which revealed the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils to the world. Due to its long association with Sri Lanka, Dr. Sharika Thiranagama, argues that the BBC in spite of being an international broadcaster has become “Sri Lankan for most Sri Lankans<sup>50</sup>”.

The BBC’s Sri Lanka correspondent, Charles Haviland, gave his comprehensive assessment of the country’s media situation for this research paper in an e- mail interview with the author in May 2012.

“Unfortunately the end of the war in Sri Lanka three years ago does not mean that the media can be called properly free. I would echo a column in the Wall Street Journal in saying that the Sri Lankan media are possibly the least free in the South Asian region<sup>51</sup>. The lack of real media freedom is of course most marked when it comes to the state media. Although some official outlets like the Daily News sometimes cover mild criticism of various government practices, others, like state TV and radio broadcasters, are more or less propaganda channels of a type more akin to Communist Cold War outlets. That means that “news” is dripping in nationalistic ideology, talk of “traitors” and “terrorist-lovers” and full of factual inaccuracies”, he says.

## 2.4 Survey of Sri Lankan journalists

To know how much has changed since the end of the war, I spoke to a number of journalists and editors and also conducted an opinion poll involving 20 journalists belonging to different religions

<sup>46</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/8657805.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8657805.stm)

<sup>47</sup> <http://blog.amnestyusa.org/asia/obama-salutes-tisainayagam/>

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2010/04\\_april/15/world\\_service.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2010/04_april/15/world_service.shtml)

<sup>49</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/02\\_february/09/sri\\_lanka.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/02_february/09/sri_lanka.shtml)

<sup>50</sup> Dr. Sharika Thiranagama, essay titled, FROM COMMONWEALTH TO ETHNOSCAPES

<sup>51</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303448404577407724228571402.html>

and working in different regions. Ten are Tamil journalists, six are employed in Sinhala media and the rest are bilingual journalists.

Q 1: Has your personal safety improved after the war?

<b>YES</b>	03
<b>NO</b>	12
<b>SOMEWHAT BETTER</b>	05

Q 2: Are you able to travel to different parts of the country to do a story?

<b>YES</b>	03
<b>NO</b>	13
<b>SOMEWHAT BETTER</b>	04

Q 3: What is the main driver behind Sri Lankan government's attitude towards media?

<b>DOMESTIC</b>	07
<b>EXTERNAL</b>	03
<b>BOTH</b>	10

Q4: Are you able to contribute to the reconciliation efforts?

<b>YES</b>	02
<b>NO</b>	12
<b>SOMEWHAT</b>	06

The majority of the reporters who participated in the survey say there has been no major improvement in the security situation. Tamil journalists working in the north say they continue to receive threats from armed Tamil groups and the army. Even three years after the end of the war, journalists have trouble in getting access to the government-run refugee camp situated north of Vavuniya. Sometimes army officials place restrictions on the movement of journalists.

The Jaffna based bi-lingual reporter Parameshwaran got into trouble for writing in the English media. "I wrote a story about the need to resettle families whose homes were forcefully taken over for the setting up of Palali High Security Zone. (Hundreds of Tamil families living near the Palali airbase in the northern Jaffna peninsula were evicted to create a buffer zone in the 90's. Many of them are yet to be resettled.) No one noticed it when it appeared in a Tamil paper, but when the same story was published in an English paper I got calls from various officials asking me what prompted me to write about an old issue. The reason they got worried is not difficult to understand. Once you write something in English, the international media can pick it up."

Devaraj the editor of Sunday Virakesari (Tamil newspaper) says there is an element of fear prevailing in the newsroom. He says journalists hesitate to share information with each other. Many journalists suspect that they are under surveillance.

## 2.5 Denial of Participation in the Reconciliation Process

Reporters and editors say they are unable to participate in peace building efforts like providing platforms for the exchange of ideas due to a lack of editorial freedom. The convenor of the Free Media Movement, Sunil Jayasekara, says that without truth there can be no reconciliation. “The UNHRC voted in March 2012, to call on Sri Lanka to implement its ‘Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commissions’ (LLRC) recommendations. But most people in Sri Lanka don’t know much about the actual recommendations of the LLRC as the media focused more on political wrangling than on the content of the report”.

To counter international calls for an independent inquiry to look into the allegations of war crimes, the Sri Lankan government set up its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, LLRC. But the government displayed a lack of enthusiasm to act on its findings. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has voted on and passed a US backed resolution calling on Sri Lanka to implement the LLRC report.

In response, Sri Lanka’s ruling party organized nationwide pro-government rallies to drum up support against the western powers which had called for the implementation of the LLRC report.<sup>52</sup> Government employees were asked to participate in pro-government rallies<sup>53</sup>. Minister Mervyn Silva threatened to “break the limbs” of traitors who bring disrepute to Sri Lanka<sup>54</sup>.

State television showed pictures of six journalists and human rights activists, identified them as traitors and carried out a hate campaign. BBC correspondent Charles Haviland recalls what happened next. “In March this year, state-owned ITN (television) started using slots in its Sinhala-language bulletins to denounce Sri Lankan journalists, some in exile and some still at home, who it said were betraying the motherland. It did not name them but repeatedly zoomed in on thinly disguised photos of them, promising to give their names soon and expose more traitors.”

Sri Lanka’s Foreign Minister G L Peiris defended the action of ITN by saying those shown had acted against the national interest.<sup>55</sup> The well-known human rights activist Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu was among those targeted by the state media campaign. He says the standard of public debate is deteriorating due to the patriot/traitor categorization of public discourse.

A day after the passing of the resolution, the chief of the UNHRC, Navi Pillay, cautioned that there must be no reprisals against Sri Lankan rights defenders<sup>56</sup>. The Sri Lankan government not only threatened the media in the country, but also attempted to intimidate human rights activists in Geneva.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_12/Feb25\\_1330148832KA.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_12/Feb25_1330148832KA.php)

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article3009997.ece>

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17491832>

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17513176>

<sup>56</sup> <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2012/03/22/sri-lanka-resolution>

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.salem-news.com/articles/march232012/lanka-church-support.php>

For ministers and other influential persons to take the law into their own hands is not a new phenomenon. In 2010, the Sri Lankan government organised a nationwide protest to denounce the UN Secretary General for constituting an expert panel to advise him on Sri Lanka. One minister even led a hunger strike in front of the UN office in Colombo forcing the UN to temporarily shut down its mission<sup>58</sup>.

The European Union withdrew trade concessions - known as GSP plus - in 2010 for non-compliance with human rights conventions.<sup>59</sup> But the overall economy continues to expand rapidly, growing by 8.3 per cent in 2011.<sup>60</sup> National per capita income is inching towards the US\$3,000 mark and a ranking of 97 in the Human Development Index ahead of China (101) and India (134) indicates the progress achieved by the island nation.<sup>61</sup> Government officials claim the highest economic growth has been recorded in the Northern Province. However, the Central Bank data reveal that over half of the GDP of that province comes from government spending, most of it devoted to defence.<sup>62</sup>

## 2.6 Censorship

Sri Lanka has a long history of censorship. Ramon Magsaysay award winner Tarzie Vittachi gives a full account of censorship in his much acclaimed book "Emergency '58- The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots". Vittachi laments the blanket ban imposed by authorities. *"It is difficult to find a parallel for the harshness of the censorship imposed on the national press of Ceylon. Even during the Battle of Britain, when the British people, almost overpowered by a well-prepared and well-equipped Luftwaffe, were fighting back with their knees and their knuckles for their very existence, the press had never been gagged as tightly"*<sup>63</sup>. Vittachi describes how the then governor general, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, imposed far reaching censorship rules following the large scale ethnic riots targeting Tamils in 1958. The governor general instructed the editors who met him at his residence on what not to report: "No news of any incidents or about any aspect of the present situation. No editorials, no comment, no columns, no photographs or cartoons of any kind on the emergency without reference to me." And this was followed with a grim reminder about what to expect if they defied the order. "I advise you to read up the Detention Laws under the Emergency Regulations. Detention without trial, no writs of habeas corpus, (and) no bail".

Fifty years later Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksha was equally blunt about the role of the media. In an interview in 2008 he said, "I think that there is no need to report anything about the military. People do not want to know how many and what kind of arms we acquired. That is not media freedom. I told the President that we need to bring in press censorship at the beginning."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/08/united-nations-closes-sri-lanka?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>

<sup>59</sup> <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/888>

<sup>60</sup>

[http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hR8qpCIDk4qwm1WB\\_LA7ofL1\\_oOA?docId=CNG.b52eda1e30632c8546099310287b2c04.821](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hR8qpCIDk4qwm1WB_LA7ofL1_oOA?docId=CNG.b52eda1e30632c8546099310287b2c04.821)

<sup>61</sup> [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Table2.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Table2.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> <http://articles.janes.com/articles/Janes-Sentinel-Security-Assessment-South-Asia/Defence-budget-Sri-Lanka.html>

<sup>63</sup> Emergency '58- The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots

<sup>64</sup> <http://freemediasrilanka.wordpress.com/2008/01/28/sri-lankan-defense-secretary-openly-states-he-is-in-favour-of-draconian-censorship-and-criminal-defamation/>

Emergency regulations were imposed in 1971 to quell the nationalistic uprising of the JVP (Sri Lankan People's Liberation Front or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna). In addition, the Prevention of Terrorism Act which was adopted in 1979, gave the government unlimited powers to curb civil liberties and placed the burden of proof on the accused. Press censorship was also enforced by the government during the civil war. Towards the end of the war the ministry of defence barred the media from reporting most of the military related developments.<sup>65</sup> Emergency regulations which were in operation during the civil were only finally withdrawn in 2011.<sup>66</sup>

Legal constraints coupled with fear of reprisal have forced journalists to resort to self-censorship. Journalists observe restraint when it comes to reporting negative developments regarding the army and pro-government Tamil militants. They wait until a politician brings these allegations into the public domain. Any demand for greater political or economic participation is viewed through the prism of separatism by the government, forcing columnists to tread a thin line. Amirthalingam Nixon, secretary of the Tamil Media Movement, says Tamil papers in Sri Lanka don't give enough space to Tamil politicians. "Usually papers try to tone down what is said in a press conference or write in general terms and delete critical, pointed remarks against government ministers or officials."

The Tamil politician and MP from Jaffna for the largest Tamil party, the Tamil National Alliance, Suresh Premachandran agrees. "Newspapers often change our words. I am not able to communicate with my constituents using my own words. They won't publish our allegations against the army. There is no media freedom and dissent is suppressed. In this situation, how is reconciliation possible?" He told this author in a telephone interview.

Dr. Saravanamuttu brings out the impact of self-censorship rather clearly in an email interview given to this researcher. "In respect to war crimes and accountability and with regard to the defence secretary and the president, the media, irrespective of whether state controlled or private, accept the government's agenda. I know from personal experience that media institutions censor criticism of the defence secretary".

The challenges faced by Tamil dailies in their news gathering operations are reflected in their pages. On many days they carry more news from India or about Tamil cinema than from the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. News pertaining to day to day activities in the north, issues like continuing human rights violations there and information about militarization are to be found more frequently and fully on the websites than in mainstream media. The editor of the Tamil daily, Thinakural Thanabalasingham, feels the attitude displayed by the government is not encouraging. "We can't write what we see, perceive and what we know. When President Rajapakse meets editors, he directly tells us, don't promote separatism or play into foreign hands."

BBC correspondent Charles Haviland says that due to government pressure and self-imposed restrictions, the papers have become very dull. "Reporting is often rather tame and without much in the way of context. Journalism becomes less creative. Often the newspapers simply copy and paste an article about Sri Lanka from an Indian or Western or Chinese media outlet rather than really

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<sup>65</sup> [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20080208\\_06](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20080208_06)

<sup>66</sup> [http://www.srilankahighcommission.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=143:sri-lanka-lifts-emergency-regulations&catid=1:news&Itemid=95](http://www.srilankahighcommission.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=143:sri-lanka-lifts-emergency-regulations&catid=1:news&Itemid=95)

doing their own journalism. And they shy away from covering thorny or difficult issues. Some of the papers are also full of tame “advertorials” dressed up as journalism. There are exceptions, that is, good and analytical and in-depth newspaper investigations and features. They are all the more praiseworthy for being the exceptions. A new daily, Ceylon Today, is owned by a politician – Tiran Alles – but shows an independent editorial line and is a very welcome addition to the newspaper scene with some very promising journalism.”

The government seems to encourage self-censorship. Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena has advised the media to exercise self-censorship in matters which can damage the integrity of the country.<sup>67</sup>

## 2.7 Lack of Criticism

During the civil war the Tamil press came under immense pressure from the Tamil Tigers. But even after the complete elimination of the Tigers, not much has been written about the crimes committed by the LTTE. UNICEF has recorded more than 6,000 cases of child soldiers recruited by the LTTE from 2003 to the end of 2008<sup>68</sup>. During the final phase of the war, many blamed the LTTE for preventing civilians from going to the government controlled areas.<sup>69</sup>

Tamil newspaper editors admit a lack of introspection regarding such issues. Thanabalasingham finds it difficult to implement change. “For thirty years or so we described the actions of the Sri Lankan state as Sinhalese terror. We need to question this. Terror whether it is in the name of Tamils or Sinhalese is dangerous to all. We must realise this”.

Sri Lankan opposition parties held a joint rally on 1 May 2012 in Jaffna to forge a broad based coalition against the government. During the procession, the leader of the largest Tamil party in parliament, Mr R Sambandan, waved the Sri Lankan national flag. This gesture was heavily criticized by the diaspora media and by the pro-tiger website Tamilnet<sup>70</sup>.

The Tamil paper Thinakural carried an editorial on 5 May 2012, arguing that the powerful gesture of Sambandan can be interpreted as a signal to the government which tries to portray him and other Tamil political leaders as separatists<sup>71</sup>. Thanabalasingham said that “After reading our editorial many readers called me and accused me of supporting an act of treason.” He says a section of the Tamil community is refusing to accept the reality. Tamilnet like the LTTE champions a separate homeland for the Tamils, whereas the Tamil politicians are keen to find a solution within a united Sri Lanka. This difference between the line taken by Thinakural and Tamilnet reflects this ideological divide.

During the war, barring a few occasions, the Sinhala media were supportive of the government war efforts and carried the government’s version of events in an uncritical manner. “When five Tamil

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<sup>67</sup> <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/16-3780-news-detail-media-should-exercise-self-censorship-lakshman-yapa.html>

<sup>68</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_48044.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_48044.html)

<sup>69</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/7985155.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7985155.stm)

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=35144>

<sup>71</sup> [http://www.thinakkural.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=14019:2012-05-05-18-21-27&catid=294:editorial&Itemid=543](http://www.thinakkural.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14019:2012-05-05-18-21-27&catid=294:editorial&Itemid=543)

students were killed in January 2006 in Trincomalee, Sinhala media tried not to report the incident. Some sections of the media portrayed the victims as LTTE supporters,” says Rohitha Bashana Abeywardene. He is the convenor for Journalist for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS), an organisation representing exiled journalists<sup>72</sup>.

Dr. Manoharan, father of one of the young victims in Trincomalee, agrees. “I don’t think the media in the south did justice to my son,” he told the BBC Sinhala service.

Politician and former MP, Mano Ganesan, says the Sinhala press is more interested in publishing political stories and does not show much interest in highlighting the numerous abductions or other problems faced by the minority communities.

After the war many Sinhalese got their first opportunity to visit northern parts of the country which had been under the control of the LTTE for decades. Initially many Sinhala journalists went there and wrote about it, but the interest has faded away. The well-known broadcaster Elmo Fernando who has recently retired from the BBC Sinhala service says part of the blame lies with the journalists. “The war has divided the country. Tamils and Sinhalese have a very different understanding of the civil war and its outcome. Tamil journalists try to reflect Tamil sentiments. Sinhala journalists project the Sinhalese angle.”

Sinhalese journalists are under pressure to take a pro-government line. “During the 2010 presidential and national parliamentary elections state media and most of the private media gave a very biased coverage in favour of the ruling party. The opposition is now claiming that there isn't a media institution that gives them adequate coverage”, says the BBC’s Charles Haviland. The state media even received criticism from the president’s son and Member of Parliament, Namal Rajapaksa. Namal told parliament that he was embarrassed by the relentless publicity given by the state run TV channels to his family. He pointed out a news bulletin which showed pictures of his father in its first story and subsequently his three uncles who hold public office and finally himself and his brother. He advised the state media to give a chance to all shades of opinion to gain credibility<sup>73</sup>.

A senior Sinhala journalist blames the lack of union membership within media organisations for the present state of affairs. He says the unionisation of journalists, technical and other non-editorial staff and public ownership of the state media would improve the media environment.

## 2.8 The Militarisation of Society

Since the end of the war there has been a noticeable increase in the militarisation of civil society. The army is actively encroaching on all areas of civilian life like running tea stalls in the north, selling vegetables in the capital Colombo and even venturing into operating rice mills.<sup>74</sup> The navy is

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<sup>72</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/highlights/story/2009/08/090823\\_media\\_police.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/highlights/story/2009/08/090823_media_police.shtml)

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.dailymirror.lk/top-story/15420-embarrassed-by-relentless-publicity-given-to-my-family-namal.html>

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.dailynews.lk/2012/06/12/news23.asp>

organising whale watching cruises<sup>75</sup>. The armed forces also run large farms, maintain cricket stadiums and organised a compulsory leadership training programmes for university students. Officers who led key formations of the army during the civil war were rewarded with plum diplomatic positions<sup>76</sup>. The Northern Province is now administered by a retired major general as there is no elected assembly there. The Eastern Province has a retired rear admiral acting as governor.

The government has not released any figures about the ethnic composition of its defence forces. But it is a generally held notion that it consists of an overwhelmingly majority of ethnic Sinhalese with a small minority of Tamils and Muslims. In 2011, the Sri Lankan government released the ethnic composition of its police force. As of July 01, 2011, out of the total of 83,423 police officers in the service, 81,328 were Sinhala police officers, 1,093 Tamil, 952 Muslim, 9 Burghers and 25 Malay<sup>77</sup>. After the war, the government has stepped up the recruitment of Tamils into the police force.<sup>78</sup>

The setting up of new military camps, war memorials and Buddhist Viharas has started to change the landscape of the north. The government has not shown any inclination to demilitarise the Northern Province. In a recent interview with the BBC, defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa claimed, "It is not appropriate to view the north of the country as a predominantly Tamil area<sup>79</sup>".

The clubbing together of police and armed forces under the defence ministry hardly gives confidence to people that their complaints against army officials will be investigated fairly. The judiciary is widely considered not to be independent, since the government has the power to appoint judges.<sup>80</sup> The creation of an executive presidency has paved the way to an accumulation of unchecked powers in the hands of the president and has seriously undermined the importance of parliament.

## 2.9 Conclusions

Even in the post war period, media freedom remains elusive. The media are unable to make use of the constitutional right to free speech as the government continues to threaten and intimidate journalists<sup>81</sup>.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) has asked the government to end harassment and repression of the media.<sup>82</sup> The panel of experts set up to advise Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, on accountability issues with respect to the final stages of the conflict in Sri Lanka has concluded that

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<sup>75</sup> <http://www.navy.lk/index.php?id=3006>

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/01/23/the-militarisation-of-sri-lanka%E2%80%99s-diplomatic-and-administrative-services/>

<sup>77</sup> [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=40052](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=40052)

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12141070>

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18207198>

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.lankastandard.com/2011/12/loss-of-judicial-independence-can-be-traced-to-the-1972-constitution-justice-wigneswaran-wh/>

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2012/mar/23/journalist-safety-srilanka>

<sup>82</sup> Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Harder than Ever Crisis Group Asia Report N°209, 18 July 2011

the restrictions placed on the media would hamper the prospects of genuine accountability and durable peace.<sup>83</sup> However, the government refuses to recognise the UN panel.<sup>84</sup>

The government-appointed LLRC has acknowledged in its report that freedom of expression and the right to information are basic human rights and play a pivotal role in any reconciliation process.<sup>85</sup> The Commission also made comprehensive recommendations to improve media freedom which includes measures to ensure freedom of movement of media persons in the north and east, the passing of the right to information act and bringing to justice those who were involved in attacks against journalists<sup>86</sup>. It gave a total of 285 recommendations out of which 135 are to be implemented by the national government. After immense international pressure the Sri Lankan government has said it will implement 33 of the 135 recommendations this year<sup>87</sup>. The LLRC recommendations to improve media freedom have not yet been implemented.

In the recent past two attempts by the opposition to bring in a Right to Information act were thwarted by the ruling party<sup>88</sup>. The lack of trust that exists between the media and the state is partly a legacy of the war. But the government has shown no enthusiasm to prosecute those involved in killing of journalists and to improve the media environment. Senior members of the government like the defence secretary continue to threaten the media. His outburst against the editor of the Sunday Leader in July 2012 provoked widespread condemnation<sup>89</sup>. International calls to improve the media environment have not yielded any tangible results. Due to the unforgiving nature of Sri Lankan society many journalists observe self-censorship and editors are more than happy to trail the news agenda set by the international media.

During the years of civil war Liberation Tamil militant groups indulged in violence against the media. But now the responsibility to improve the situation rests squarely with the government. The reasons behind the government's unease about its past record and its reluctance to bring those who committed war crimes to justice are not difficult to see. Wikileaks cables show the assessment of the US ambassador in Colombo on the issue of accountability. "There are no examples we know of a regime undertaking wholesale investigations of its own troops or senior officials for war crimes while that regime or government remained in power<sup>90</sup>."

The media is highly divided along ethnic lines and their financial control and ownership overwhelmingly lies with people who have their own political agenda. Under the circumstances it is difficult to foresee improvements in the media environment inside the country in the near future.

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<sup>83</sup> UN panel report on Sri Lanka

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10405996>

<sup>85</sup> LLRC report

<sup>86</sup> <http://slembassyusa.org/downloads/LLRC-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>87</sup> [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_12A/Jun13\\_1339598658CH.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_12A/Jun13_1339598658CH.php)

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.southasianrights.org/?p=3128>

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2012/07/08/gota-goes-berserk/>

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/243811>

### 3 Case Studies

Almost all the war victims have a compelling story to tell. But they often find it difficult to get the media to listen to them. Due to the intensity of the Sri Lankan war and the sheer amount of death and destruction it caused, journalists were often overtaken by events and hardly had time to document personal stories. The total number of deaths mentioned in the headlines is of course very important. But those numbers may not convey the pain and sufferings inflicted on the general population. Journalists now have an opportunity to revisit many of the stories and assuage the feeling of the war victims. This chapter examines the struggle of two women from very different backgrounds and their interaction and experience with the media.

#### 3.1 Search for a Missing Husband

Ms. Ananthi Sasidharan claims to have witnessed the surrender of her husband Ezhilan and many other LTTE leaders to Sri Lankan government forces during the final days of the war in 2009. She says since then she has not heard from her husband, a well-known LTTE leader, and has been given no information about his fate.

It has been alleged that many high ranking LTTE leaders who surrendered during the closing days of the civil war were subsequently killed. The story was first brought to international attention by Marie Colvin of the Sunday Times<sup>91</sup>. Video footages showing summary executions broadcasted by Channel 4 have increased fears about the fate of missing persons.

The Sri Lankan army chief during the war, General Sarath Fonseka (who also contested unsuccessfully as a common opposition candidate in the 2010 presidential election against incumbent president Rajapaksa.) was quoted in an interview as saying that LTTE cadres were shot as per orders from above<sup>92</sup>. He retracted his claim within a day. The government subsequently filed a case against him accusing him of treason. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

One year after the end of the war, the government appointed a commission with a mandate to look into allegations of human rights violations during the war and to suggest a meaningful reconciliation process. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission's (LLRC) sitting in the northern town of Killinochi generated significant interest among Sri Lankan observers due to the importance Killinochi had as the de facto headquarter of the vanquished LTTE. The government banned the BBC from attending this crucial meeting without giving any reasons but local media reporters were allowed to be present<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> Sunday Times, 24 May 2009.

<sup>92</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2009/12/13/%E2%80%9Cgot-a-ordered-them-to-be-shot%E2%80%9D-%E2%80%93-general-sarath-fonseka/>

<sup>93</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11349494>

The public hearing went on for two days in September 2010. On the first day of the hearing Ananthi Sasitharan told the LLRC that she saw her husband and many others surrendering to the army on 18 May of 2009. She asked them to help her locate them. In spite of the ban the BBC spoke to her over the phone.<sup>94</sup>

“During that time no one in Sri Lanka was ready to listen to the plight of people like me. I wrote to two leading Tamil dailies and a FM radio station. But it was not reported. After the publication of my interview on the BBC website, many newspapers published the story quoting the BBC”, she recalls.

A UN expert panel drawing comparisons with similar reconciliation commissions in Morocco, Peru and South Africa observed that in those countries, the work of the commission was televised as a way to contribute to public debate. The UN panel further said the LLRC has failed to conduct all its proceedings in a transparent manner.<sup>95</sup> The Sri Lankan government did not even publicize the purpose of the commission which left the locals confused about its purpose.<sup>96</sup>

Ananthi Sasitharan's interview with the BBC Tamil service was widely re-published in local and diaspora media. Subsequently her story was picked up by the international press. Associated Press reported about her case on August 10, 2011. More recently, on March 22, 2012 she was featured in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) TV news report<sup>97</sup>.

The former editor of the Jaffna based Uthyan Newspaper, Mr Gnanasundaram Kuganathan, explains the difficulties in doing these types of stories. “After the end of the war, those who came out of the war zone were housed in high security camps. We had no access to these camps and moreover even if we had managed to get controversial information from the refugees, the government would have denied it. It could also have harmed those who spoke to us”.

After spending six months in the refugee camps with her three daughters Ananthi has re-joined the government service. She continues her personal campaign to find her husband and has written to the UN, the ICRC, the Sri Lankan President and many others.

Ananthi feels her own sense of personal security improved after she spoke to the BBC. “When the police CID officers (Criminal Investigation Department) questioned me about my interview, I told them that the whole world knows my story and if something happens to me, everyone will know who is responsible.” She didn't succeed in getting political asylum in a western country and has now relocated to Jaffna.

In her first interview with the BBC Ananthi Sasitharan stated that her husband and others surrendered in the presence of a Jesuit teacher, Father Francis, who negotiated the terms of the surrender with the army. Nothing has been heard of Father Francis since then. Earlier this year, Church leaders from the north of Sri Lanka have confirmed indirectly in their letter to the UNHRC that a priest has gone missing<sup>98</sup>. The government has repeatedly denied murdering those who came forward to surrender. It says over 11,000 LTTE cadres surrendered or were captured during the final

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<sup>94</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11383437>

<sup>95</sup> UN panel report on Sri Lanka

<sup>96</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/9047814.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9047814.stm)

<sup>97</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2012/s3461710.htm>

<sup>98</sup> <http://transcurrents.com/news-views/archives/9077>

phase of the war and that most of them have been released. The government has not published the names of those who surrendered.

### 3.2 Silencing Dissent

*“When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.”<sup>99</sup>*

- Lasantha Wickrematunge, Editor of the Sunday Leader.

Sonali Samarasinghe is the widow of Lasantha Wickrematunge. A lawyer by training, she chose journalism for the challenges it offers. She had worked with her future husband for over 10 years. She was the Chief Investigative Journalist and Consultant Editor of the Sunday Leader newspaper and on many occasions was its acting Editor in Chief whenever Lasantha was away. She was also Editor in Chief of the midweekly Morning Leader newspaper which was forced to shut down on March 1, 2009 after she fled the country. Two months after their marriage, on 8th Jan 2009, Lasantha was killed by unidentified assailants in a busy traffic intersection in Colombo near a high security zone which houses the country’s largest air force base. His death provoked widespread international condemnation.

Lasantha Wickramatunge’s Sunday Leader can be described as an anti-establishment newspaper, known for exposing corruption and the misuse of power by politicians and others in leading positions. His paper withstood many attacks from successive governments. Lasantha narrowly survived a brutal attack in 1995. On February 7 that year Lasantha and his wife stopped while driving home when they noticed a broken down vehicle. Four masked men sprang from that vehicle armed with clubs and nail-spiked poles, physically thrashing Lasantha and his wife before making a hasty escape<sup>100</sup>. Not a single person was arrested in connection with this attack. A few years later his home and office came under attack. Yet he continued to work in an “unbowed and unafraid” manner – the words inscribed in the masthead of Sunday Leader.

By his own admission, Lasantha Wikrematunga once enjoyed a good relationship with the president, Mahinda Rajapaksa. “The irony is that, unknown to most of the public, Mahinda and I have been friends for more than a quarter century. Indeed, I suspect that I am one of the few people remaining who routinely addresses him by his first name and uses the familiar Sinhala address ‘oya’ when talking to him<sup>101</sup>”.

At the same time the Sunday Leader continued to publish stories exposing corruption and dubious defence deals, and was also highly critical of the way in which the war was waged against the Tamil Tigers. As a result, the personal relationship between Lasantha and the president started to suffer. On 6 Jan 2006, Lasantha published an open letter about the threatening phone call he had received from the president. “We have no doubt, it is well within your power to do me harm,” Lasantha stated.<sup>102</sup> Later in the second half of 2008 he was sued for US\$10 million by the defence secretary in

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<sup>99</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/20090111/editorial-.htm>

<sup>100</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/20071125/spotlight-1.htm>

<sup>101</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/20090111/editorial-.htm>

<sup>102</sup> <http://www.lasanthawickrematunge.com/open-letter-to-mahinda-rajapaksa>

a defamation case<sup>103</sup>. Sonali, his widow, reflects Lasantha's perceptions on that case. "We had published numerous articles which prominently featured defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. All were firmly based on evidence as was the article upon which the defamation case was filed. In fact Lasantha himself suspected that the case was just a smoke screen to a more sinister plot."

On the 1 January 2009, government troops achieved a major breakthrough and captured the town of Killinochi which was the de facto capital of the Tamil Tigers. On 8 January Lasantha was killed.

Three days after the murder of Lasantha, The Sunday Leader with Sonali as its acting editor published a long letter written by Lasantha addressed to the president. From the letter it is clear Lasantha foresaw his death.

"No other profession calls on its practitioners to lay down their lives for their art save the armed forces - and, in Sri Lanka, journalism. In the course of the last few years, the independent media have increasingly come under attack. Electronic and print institutions have been burned, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories, and now especially the last,<sup>104</sup>" Lasantha wrote.

The article was republished in a number of newspapers including The Guardian, The New Yorker and many other respected publications. The BBC and Al Jazeera did programmes about his killing. The BBC World Service radio voiced the whole letter. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on diplomats to press for the protection of journalists working in Sri Lanka<sup>105</sup>.

After his death Lasantha became a symbol of free speech. The German ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jürgen Weerth, participated in Lasantha's funeral, not just by representing his country, but in his capacity as the dean of the Colombo based diplomatic corps. He made a powerful comment: "Today is a day when one remains speechless; maybe we should have spoken then. Today it is too late<sup>106</sup>." Angered by this, the government summoned the German ambassador and conveyed its displeasure. Germany retaliated by summoning the Sri Lankan ambassador. Many foreign governments, international organisations and media rights groups expressed outrage over the murder. Six former US ambassadors to Sri Lanka took the unprecedented step of writing to the Sri Lankan President to take steps to re-establish accountability and the rule of law<sup>107</sup>.

The Defence Secretary responded by issuing a stern warning. "Western diplomats, foreign journalists and aid groups will be chased out of the country if they appear to favour the Tamil Tiger rebels<sup>108</sup>". In an interview with the BBC, the Defence Secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, called the murdered editor Lasantha Wickramatunge a "tabloid journalist who had many enemies<sup>109</sup>". His views gave a rude shock to Sonali. "He was belittling the murder of a leading newspaper editor and dismissing the killing saying thousands have been killed by the LTTE so why should we care about just one man. What kind of barbaric logic is this? Lasantha was killed in a well-planned attack. All the evidence points to a possible role the government or authorities played in this murder. It is not due to lack of

<sup>103</sup> [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20081205\\_09](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20081205_09)

<sup>104</sup> <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/20090111/editorial-.htm>

<sup>105</sup> <http://cpj.org/2009/01/diplomatic-pressure-needed-to-protect-journalists.php>

<sup>106</sup> [http://transcurrents.com/tc/2009/01/germany\\_sri\\_lanka\\_diplomatic\\_r.html](http://transcurrents.com/tc/2009/01/germany_sri_lanka_diplomatic_r.html)

<sup>107</sup> <http://srilanka.usembassy.gov/letter-19jan09.html>

<sup>108</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/01/ri-lanka-tamil-tigers-media>

<sup>109</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/7868080.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7868080.stm)

evidence but rather due to lack of political will that nothing has happened in the past three years and the investigation is just a sham.”

Lasantha Wickramatunge and Sonali are not supporters of the Tamil Tigers. Sonali says the government seems to have feared that Lasantha with his vast network of dependable sources would have exposed the excesses committed by the Sri Lankan forces. She argues the motive for killing Lasantha was to send a warning. “It broke the backbone of the media. Every journalist and even publishers and members of civil society felt that if they can target someone like Lasantha – then it will be nothing for them to snuff them out at any time if the government felt they got out of line.”

Two weeks after his death, Sonali Wickramatunge had to flee the country, after a neighbour alerted her to the presence of suspicious looking people keeping a watch over her home. She also received messages from officials close to her indicating concerns for her safety. Local print and electronic media decided not to publish a letter Sonali wrote to the Sri Lanka’s Inspector General of Police from Europe regarding the murder case<sup>110</sup>. However Colombo based website Groundviews published the full text of the letter.

Posthumously Lasantha was awarded many honours including the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize<sup>111</sup>. These awards brought international focus on the unsolved murder probe. “International pressure has its limitations. Every country acts on its geopolitical interests. Here in the US it is easy to get a letter from a senator asking Sri Lanka to speed up the investigation into Lasantha’s killing. But it will be very difficult to change the country’s policy towards Sri Lanka. There is no such thing as a Human Rights driver of foreign policy,” says Sonali Wickramatunge.

The US government was the primary mover for bringing a resolution against Sri Lanka in the UNHRC. But the resolution was watered down by the intervention of India<sup>112</sup>. The US too is in a dilemma over how to deal with Sri Lanka. In 2009 a congress report recommended for the administration to take a pragmatic approach. “Take a broader and more robust approach to Sri Lanka that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and U.S. geostrategic interests. Such an approach should be multidimensional so that U.S. policy is not driven solely by short-term humanitarian concerns but rather an integrated strategy that leverages political, economic, and security tools for more effective long-term reforms<sup>113</sup>,” the report said.

Sonali has now started her own web site (<http://www.lankastandard.com>) to publish stories that are different to the official version of events and deal with journalistic freedom in Sri Lanka. After the end of two fellowships she is finding it hard to make ends meet. She is hoping that sometime in the future there will be justice for Lasantha and that she will be able to return to a Sri Lanka governed by the rule of law.

### 3.3 Conclusions

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<sup>110</sup> <http://groundviews.org/2009/03/26/is-the-president-hiding-lasantha-wickremetunges-killers/>

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/press-freedom/unesco-world-press-freedom-prize/previous-laureates/2009/>

<sup>112</sup> <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-votes-against-sri-lanka-but-sugarcoats-us-resolution/927333>

<sup>113</sup> <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SRI.pdf>

Lasantha Wicramatunge was a well-known editor. His death was widely published and condemned. Yet, international media scrutiny and diplomatic pressure have not brought about change. Western powers have not used their leverage to stop multilateral lending institutions like the International Monetary Fund from giving loans to Sri Lanka. Even when European Union's trade concessions were withdrawn, Sri Lanka was able to come out unscathed due to political and financial support provided by China.

In an interview given to Time Magazine after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, President Mahinda Rajapaksa called Lasantha his "good friend" and denied widespread accusations that his government was responsible for his murder<sup>114</sup>. But the government investigation into Lasantha's murder has gone nowhere. Lack of proper investigation and prosecution has given credence to theories which point to the degree of the government's tolerance if not direct involvement in crimes against journalists. Lasantha and Sonali were well known members of the Sri Lankan press fraternity. But Sonali was not able to count on fellow journalists when she suffered the wrath of the government. Soon after the killing of Lasantha, the majority stakes in the Sunday Leader Newspaper were sold to a businessman with close links to the Sri Lankan establishment. Sonali has completely disassociated herself from the paper.

Ananthi Sasidharan's decision to speak up against the government has had a cascading effect. Many more women came forward in the subsequent sittings of the LLRC and demanded information about their husbands and sons. In a country where even now forced disappearances continue to be reported it was astonishing to see a mother of three putting up such a fight. In the past many victims avoided talking to the media for fear of aggravating the situation. Ananthi came out and sought the help of the media to bring out her story. She hoped a media focus on her missing husband would force the government to come clean on that matter. But to her dismay the local media avoided talking to women like her. Even when she narrated her tale before the LLRC, her disposition was not fully covered. She takes consolation from the interest shown by the international media in the missing persons.

Sri Lankan diplomats and officials use every opportunity to tell the world how they rehabilitated most of the ex LTTE combatants. They have even picked ex rebel snipers to represent the nation in the South Asian Games<sup>115</sup>. Yet there has been no closure for thousands of people like Ananthi.

The oppressive media environment in Sri Lanka has disabled its basic watchdog function. Instead of giving a voice to the voiceless in Sri Lanka, major sections of the media are being obsequious to the government. Editors openly admit toeing the government line and avoid doing stories which have the potential to anger the government. Local reporters are better equipped to handle individual stories as they know the background of victims and would be in a better position to cross check information. But due to the deteriorating media environment and the risk aversion strategy employed by the proprietors the local journalists have to do a fine balancing act on a day to day basis and avoid controversial stories. As a result, victims of war look to the international media and new media to bring out their miseries. Difficulties faced by the journalists coupled with the indifference shown by the government leaves hundreds of people like Ananthi and Sonali with little to hope for.

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<sup>114</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1910095,00.html>

<sup>115</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18831958>

## 4 Channel 4 and the impact of international media

*“Once or twice in a reporting lifetime, a journalist is allowed by events to participate in a project that can affect history”<sup>116</sup>.*

- Jon Snow on “Killing Fields of Sri Lanka”

*“The Channel 4 film has the potential to incite hatred amongst different communities in Sri Lanka, including future generations, and thereby, adversely affect the on-going national reconciliation process”.<sup>117</sup>*

- Sri Lankan government response to Channel 4

Britain’s Channel 4 has become a household name in Sri Lanka. Its sustained coverage of Sri Lankan current affairs has turned the channel into a favourite of the Tamil diaspora. But as one can expect, Channel 4 is despised by the government.

Three months after the end of the war, on 25 August 2009, Channel 4 broadcast a video clip. The footage was a mobile phone camera recording and was obtained by a group of exile journalists, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, JDS. It showed two naked men being executed by armed men in green uniforms. Altogether nine dead bodies can be seen in the video. Channel 4 in its news report quoted JDS’ claim that the incident happened in January 2009 and those who got killed were Tamils<sup>118</sup>. The convenor of JDS, Bashana Abeywardene recalls the impact of the video. “When the first video evidence came out, the response was absolutely hysterical and vicious. It took the government by surprise and therefore they could not stick to one version of denial. First they said it was 'misinterpreted' (saying that it shows 'tigers killing soldiers') and then they said it was staged and filmed. After a while, they said the material was technically manipulated and so on. Our work was projected as a 'conspiracy against the motherland' which is being paid for by the tiger rump.”

The place where the alleged shooting took place was not conclusively established. “We saw the footage again and again and we were convinced it was authentic and shot in northern Sri Lanka”, says Abeywardene.

On 14 June 2011, Channel 4 aired a controversial documentary called Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields. A longer version of the execution clip described above and another clip showing the execution of three others were shown in the documentary. It also showed a number of naked bodies of female fighters and the narrator suggests the possibility of sexual assault. Interviews with former UN officials and

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<sup>116</sup> <http://srilanka.channel4.com/>

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[http://www.srilankahighcommission.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=92:statement-by-sri-lanka-high-commission-london-on-the-channel-4-film-sri-lankas-killing-fields&catid=1:news&Itemid=95](http://www.srilankahighcommission.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=92:statement-by-sri-lanka-high-commission-london-on-the-channel-4-film-sri-lankas-killing-fields&catid=1:news&Itemid=95)

<sup>118</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/sri-lanka-execution-video-evidence-of-war-crimes>

experts were used to substantiate allegations of war crimes. In the final part the documentary showed footage of a senior LTTE commander known as 'Colonel Ramesh' being interrogated and later images of his dead body. It also describes the LTTE as a ruthless army which recruited child soldiers and carried out suicide bombings.

Channel 4 waived its usual commercial rights for the documentary. It was rebroadcast by ABC in Australia, NRK2 in Norway and by Headlines Today in India. A Tamil TV channel based in Tamil Nadu also dubbed it and aired it. Diaspora Tamil organisations distributed DVDs of the documentary. Most of the British newspapers wrote positive reviews commending the effort of the film makers. A special screening of the documentary was organised for diplomats and politicians at the UN in Geneva and New York.

The British Prime Minister David Cameron, while admitting in Parliament that he had not seen the documentary, said, "We need to make sure we get to the bottom of what happened and that lessons are learned." Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt said he was shocked by the horrific scenes<sup>119</sup>. A day after the programme was aired by the Australian broadcaster ABC, Australian parliamentarians demanded action against Sri Lanka. The programme even got nominated for a Nobel Prize<sup>120</sup>. Many Indian TV channels broadcast a panel discussion about the content of the documentary. Regional parties from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu demanded that the Indian government change its policy towards Sri Lanka. Media pressure coupled with the change in internal political dynamics resulted in India voting against Sri Lanka in the US sponsored resolution in the UNHRC in March 2012.

#### 4.1 Government's response

Sri Lankan officials initially dismissed the Channel 4 execution video as fake and an attempt to discredit Sri Lanka<sup>121</sup>. They also unleashed a media campaign to counter the documentary. A private TV station in Sri Lanka carried what it claimed to be an "unaltered version" of the controversial execution video<sup>122</sup>. In that footage the executioners were heard speaking in Tamil. An expert panel which included a serving army officer was set up by the government to examine the video. The panel predictably concluded that the video was a fake and had been tampered with. But two different UN special rapporteurs on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions have concluded that the video is authentic. The Sri Lankan government rejected their findings and questioned the credentials of the UN experts.<sup>123</sup>

The government-appointed LLRC asked Channel 4 to hand over the original footage for forensic investigation, but the request was rejected. The commission observed that there are strong cases which support and oppose the integrity of the video but it refrained from passing any judgement. It

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<sup>119</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/foreign-office-presses-sri-lanka-on-war-crimes>

<sup>120</sup> <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/nobel-peace-prize-nomination-uk-and-australian-mps-support-channel-4-sri-lankas-killing-fields/>

<sup>121</sup> <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/sri-lanka-slams-war-video-propaganda-by-ltte/1/177923.html/>

<sup>122</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2011/07/110702\\_video.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2011/07/110702_video.shtml)

<sup>123</sup> <http://srilankausa.weebly.com/un--forensics-hoax.html>

recommended setting up another commission to study the footage.<sup>124</sup> The International Crisis Group called for an independent and international investigation to find out the truth<sup>125</sup>.

The ministry of defence for its part produced a documentary titled, "Lies Agreed Upon". It brought out certain inconsistencies in Channel 4's reports. It questioned the correctness of describing a woman called Isaipriya as a star TV presenter. It pointed out that the earlier Channel 4 report identified Isaipriya as a member of the LTTE. It also listed the various crimes allegedly committed by LTTE commander Ramesh who was shown in the Channel 4 video first alive and later dead. But the government film was silent about the circumstances of his death. This documentary was shown on national television in Sri Lanka. No international broadcaster re-broadcast it. The whole documentary is available on YouTube<sup>126</sup>.

In the Channel 4 documentary, a young British Tamil student, Damilvany Gnanakumar, who worked as a volunteer in the only functioning hospital, described how the hospital was shelled repeatedly by government forces. However, the Sri Lankan government documentary used the government doctors who worked in the war zone to repudiate the claims of Damilvany. Leaked US cables reveal that the government doctors were forced to recant civilian casualty figures<sup>127</sup>.

The Sri Lankan government's reluctance to engage with the substantive allegations made by Channel 4 was evident from the interview given by Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa to a private Indian TV Channel. He described Damilvany as an "attractive" woman and added that she was neither raped nor killed by Sri Lankan soldiers. So he contended that the allegation of sexual assault by soldiers could not be true.<sup>128</sup> Even the Chennai (formerly Madras-south India) based influential newspaper The Hindu which took a distinct pro-government line during the war found it difficult to digest this bizarre logic and wrote an editorial condemning the conduct of Rajapaksa<sup>129</sup>.

The UK based organisation Sri Lanka Media watch also released a 28-page long report questioning the claims of the documentary. Its website claims it was established to monitor coverage of Sri Lanka in the international media. Its analysis of the documentary states: "Interestingly, not once did Snow (the main presenter of Channel 4 News) refer to the LTTE as a terrorist organisation or that it was listed as one. He preferred the term "army". It is also worth pointing out that despite a statutory obligation to be balanced and fair, in Channel 4's 50 minute-long programme LTTE human rights abuses, of which there was ample evidence during the events supposedly being reported upon, received 49 seconds of air time<sup>130</sup>." There is no information about who is behind Sri Lanka Media watch. But a cursory look at their documents reveals heavy reliance on the records and language of the Sri Lankan defence ministry.

The Sri Lankan ministry of defence also came up with a 170-page report titled "Humanitarian Operation Factual Analysis". It dwells on the history of violence committed by the Tamil Tigers and questions the Channel 4 claims that as many as 400,000 civilians were trapped in the fighting

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<sup>124</sup> LLRC report

<sup>125</sup> <http://www.crisisgroupblogs.org/srilanka-lastingpeace/2011/09/16/lies-agree-upon/#more-1>

<sup>126</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5O1JAfRXew>

<sup>127</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/221996>

<sup>128</sup> <http://transcurrents.com/news-views/archives/2921>

<sup>129</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/article2359597.ece>

<sup>130</sup> <http://engagesrilanka.com/images/Appalling%20Journalism.pdf>

zone<sup>131</sup>. During the war, the government deliberately underestimated the number of civilians in the LTTE controlled areas. In January 2009, the defence ministry said only about 75,000 - 100,000 people were present there.<sup>132</sup> A month later in an interview with AFP, defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said only around 70,000 civilians remained in the war zone.<sup>133</sup> In the final week of April President Rajapaksa claimed only about 5,000 to 10,000 were there. But the defence ministry documents stated that in the last days of the war 80,000 people escaped from the LTTE leadership.<sup>134</sup>

After the broadcast of the documentary, several public debates took place between the documentary makers and Sri Lankan officials. In one such meeting in New York, Sri Lankan officials participated in an open debate with the director of the Killing Field documentary, Cullum Macrae.<sup>135</sup> Deputy Permanent Representative Major General Shavendra Silva questioned the correctness of the translation. But the film maker informed the audience that they used four translators. State media presented this debate as a great victory for the government and claimed "The filmmaker Cullum Macrae seemed devastated when Ambassador Silva pointed out the false translation".<sup>136</sup> But others like the Groundviews website gave a very different picture<sup>137</sup>.

Tamil newspapers used the broadcast of the Killing Field documentary to revisit war crimes and other grievances. The former news editor of Uthayan, G Kuhanathan recalls how the documentary helped him. "First we published a detailed report about the contents of the Channel 4 documentary. Subsequently we published five different articles containing various allegations that surfaced at that time and called for a proper investigation. If we had published them without the context of the Channel 4 documentary, the Government would not have tolerated it."

One exiled journalist claims that the documentary reset the agenda of the international media. "After the war some sections of the international media carried stories about the business opportunities in Sri Lanka. Most of the western media saw the LTTE as a terror outfit and did not feel sad about its demise. But after the broadcast of the documentaries many have started to report about the war crimes".

In March 2012 Channel 4 broadcast a sequel to the Sri Lanka's Killing Fields documentary. This documentary featured a clip which showed the immediate aftermath of the killing of Tamil Tiger leader Prabhakaran's 12-year-old son. It argued that there is a clear command responsibility for the war crimes. The airing of the documentary coincided with a debate in the UNHRC on Sri Lanka.

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<sup>131</sup> <http://slembassyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Sri-Lankan-Humanitarian-Operation-Factual-Analysis.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20090130\\_F01](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20090130_F01)

<sup>133</sup>

[http://www.priu.gov.lk/news\\_update/Current\\_Affairs/ca200902/20090226\\_civilians\\_slowing\\_sl\\_advance\\_defence\\_scretary.htm](http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca200902/20090226_civilians_slowing_sl_advance_defence_scretary.htm)

<sup>134</sup> [http://www.defence.lk/news/20110801\\_Conf.pdf](http://www.defence.lk/news/20110801_Conf.pdf) ( Para 208)

<sup>135</sup> <http://groundviews.org/2011/06/27/the-war-that-confronts-us-looking-at-sri-lankas-official-responses-to-channel-4-video/>

<sup>136</sup> <http://www.dailynews.lk/2011/06/23/sec02.asp>

<sup>137</sup> <http://groundviews.org/2011/06/27/the-war-that-confronts-us-looking-at-sri-lankas-official-responses-to-channel-4-video/>

Writing on the newly launched website of the organisation Journalists for Democracy, the film director Callum Macrae commented, “We showed footage which the government said was evidence of Tigers firing into the ground to prevent civilians from escaping – and images of the aftermath of LTTE suicide bombers. But the Rajapaksa regime cannot hide behind the crimes of the Tigers.”<sup>138</sup> Diaspora Tamil leaders who have long defended the crimes of the LTTE have now taken a new avatar of human rights defenders. They are using channel 4 reports to carry forward their campaign. In an interview with this author in May 2012, Jon Snow says, “Our purpose is not to help their propaganda but these things can’t be avoided”. He also indicated that Channel 4 continues to get new videos and photos showing more evidence of war crimes.

The comments left by Tamils and Sinhalese in various forums like the Channel 4 website, to a large extent reflect the ethnic divide. Opinions from what appears to be persons with non Sri Lankan names generally express shock, anger, helplessness and despair. The channel’s website contains a separate section with information and stories exclusively on Sri Lanka.<sup>139</sup> Not a single one has been about a positive development. Channel 4 documentaries gave the much needed ammunition to the critics of the government. While giving a lecture in Colombo the former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga said her son called her after watching the Channel 4 documentary and told her that, “he was ashamed to call himself Sinhalese and Sri Lankan”<sup>140</sup>.

The first documentary mentions the suicide bombing by the LTTE, but only in the second documentary was a suicide attack actually shown. There were credible reports that the LTTE placed its heavy weapons in the no fire zone and prevented the movement of civilians. These points were not discussed in the documentaries and not a single vox pop critical of the Tamil Tigers was shown. However the video footage of the executions disproved government’s version of the war. It put the government on the spot and forced it to change its old narrative that not a single civilian was killed during the war.

## 4.2 Paid Supplement

On 6 June 2012, the British newspaper The Guardian carried a front-page story under the headline “Tamils deported to Sri Lanka tortured, victim claims”. The story was about a man who was identified as Hari. The story made a strong case against deporting failed asylum seekers to Sri Lanka. The publication of this story coincided with the visit of Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa who was in London to attend the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations. On the same day the front page of The Guardian featured the story about human rights violations, the paper also carried a 24 page supplement funded by the Sri Lankan government. There was a mention in small print that it was an independent supplement and the Guardian was not responsible for its content. But it is unlikely many readers would have noticed the disclaimer. The supplement titled “Sri Lanka - Asia's next wonder?” presented a rosy picture of country.

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<sup>138</sup> <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/2012-01-30-09-31-17/human-rights/14-sri-lankas-killing-fields-digging-out-the-truth>

<sup>139</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/sri-lanka-civil-war>

<sup>140</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-14274988>

A strong story castigating the human rights abuses in Sri Lanka and a supplement paying tributes to the achievements of Sri Lanka in the same newspaper on the same day left many readers confused. Some registered their protest and asked for clarification. The Guardian's readers' editor, Chris Elliott admitted that it was "an unhappy clash of editorial and commercial content". He added in future paid supplements would only appear after being approved by the editorial department<sup>141</sup>.

In the first week of June 2012, Channel 4 carried a similar story highlighting Britain's decision to deport failed Sri Lankan asylum seekers<sup>142</sup>. Another British paper, The Independent, also published a story of a Tamil man who was tortured in Sri Lanka after being deported from the UK<sup>143</sup>. All three reports (The Guardian, The Independent and Channel 4) mentioned that the Sri Lankan president would be arriving in the UK soon. All three news reports also contained quotes from the UK Home office and NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Freedom from Torture which mentioned Sri Lanka's dismal human rights record. The Independent and The Guardian reports contained specific cases of alleged torture, but they published the story without getting comments from the Sri Lankan authorities.

On June 7, 2012 The Independent published the story under the headline, "As its President dines with the Queen, Sri Lanka's torture of its Tamils is revealed". The story was based on 32 videos and 26 photos obtained by a London Tamil lawyer. The footage showed more than 100 corpses laid out in rows. "While the majority of men are fully clothed or topless, almost all the women featured in the video have been deliberately stripped naked or had their breasts and genitals exposed".

The Independent story went on to say, "The latest videos obtained by The Independent reveal how - even after death - Tamils were often treated with contempt by Sinhalese soldiers". LTTE media and parts of the diaspora media use the term Sinhalese soldiers to denote government troops. It is true that the Sri Lankan army has a very limited presence of ethnic minorities. Yet the use of phrases like these and publishing war crime stories coinciding with the state visit of the Sri Lankan president or the UNHRC meeting makes it easy for Sri Lankan officials to argue that there is a wider conspiracy at play.

When President Rajapaksa came to the UK in 2010, Channel 4 released the longer version of the execution video clip which was subsequently shown in their documentary<sup>144</sup>. That video galvanised the already well organised British Tamil groups. Their planned protest meeting forced the cancellation of President Rajapaksa's scheduled speech at the Oxford Union.<sup>145</sup>

Exiled journalists and diaspora groups have established good contacts with the western media through which they are able to take on the Sri Lanka government. Since these groups are comparatively more active in the UK, the media here are able to bring out more critical stories. These efforts have caused the Sri Lankan government considerable embarrassment.

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<sup>141</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/10/clash-editorial-commercial-sri-lanka?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>

<sup>142</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/uk-returns-36-asylum-seekers-to-sri-lanka>

<sup>143</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/special-report-tamil-asylumseekers-to-be-forcibly-deported-7804982.html>

<sup>144</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/sri-lanka-execution-video-new-war-crimes-claims>

<sup>145</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11891866>

Judging by the government's reaction to the Channel 4 documentary, it would be fair to conclude that the execution footage caught the government off guard. It engaged experts who disputed the genuineness of the footage.<sup>146</sup> Channel 4's unrelenting coverage of Sri Lankan affairs has also forced other international media organisations to focus more on Sri Lanka resulting in a significant erosion of Sri Lanka's image.

Days after the end of the civil war, several western European countries tried to pass a UN resolution to hold Sri Lanka to account for the excesses committed during the war. But due to strong efforts by countries like India, China, Brazil and Cuba, a resolution praising the government was passed in the UNHRC<sup>147</sup>. Three years later in 2012, the Indian government due to political pressure from Tamil Nadu abandoned its stand and helped the passage of the US sponsored resolution in the UNHRC. Other countries too have become more sceptical about the claims of President Rajapaksa's government due to the media's exposure of Sri Lankan affairs.

The supplement in The Guardian illustrates the government's desire to engage the western media and the public in the west. In the post war period, the government has enlisted the services of a number of public relation firms, one of which reportedly wrote the speech the president gave to the UN in 2010<sup>148</sup>. The Sri Lankan government denies this. On its home turf, Sri Lanka adopts a confrontational approach to western media. It impounded copies of The Economist magazine on two occasions when it carried stories critical of Sri Lanka<sup>149</sup>. It expelled a woman of Sri Lankan origin and her husband who were working for Channel 4. When the BBC asked about the rationale behind this move an official said, "Because they are from Channel 4, which without reason has harmed Sri Lanka's reputation<sup>150</sup>."

However, as the government will have realised by now, even the best media strategy cannot provide insulation against duplicity, doublespeak and deception in the long run. It is not just the international media - even diplomats now question the government's version of events<sup>151</sup>.

Tamil politicians find comfort in the International media coverage, as it helps to mobilise international public opinion. Some of the crimes highlighted by the international media validate the long held accusations of Tamils. Inadvertently these reports come in handy for scores of Tamil asylum seekers and campaigners who claim normalcy has not returned to Sri Lanka<sup>152</sup>. Sections of the western media get carried away by the input they get from the diaspora and end up filling stories which lack balance. Yet it cannot be denied that the Channel 4 documentary has forced other western media organisations to revisit Sri Lanka which resulted in plethora of stories critical of the government. Since many of the stories were picked up and published in bits and pieces in Sri Lankan newspapers, it ultimately had a trickling down effect. The Sri Lankan government may be in a denial mode but the sustained coverage of the international press has made it clear to those in power that the story is not yet over.

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<sup>146</sup> <http://www.lankajournal.com/2011/12/lirc-recommends-independent-probe-into-c-4-video/>

<sup>147</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/28/un-sri-lanka-ban-ki-moon>

<sup>148</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16051177>

<sup>149</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2010/08/100822\\_economist\\_ban.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2010/08/100822_economist_ban.shtml)

<sup>150</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18342967>

<sup>151</sup> <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/4941>

<sup>152</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/07/tamil-torture-british-deportation-policy>

## 5 The Role of Exiled Journalists and Diaspora media

Sri Lanka ranks fourth behind Iraq, Somalia, and Sierra Leone, on CPJ's (Committee to Protect Journalists) Global Impunity Index, a ranking of countries where journalists are murdered frequently and the killers go unpunished. The country ranks 13th on CPJ's database of journalists killed<sup>153</sup>. RSF's (Reporters Without Borders) report states that at least 55 Sri Lankan journalists have left their country between 2008 and 2010<sup>154</sup>.

### 5.1 Reporting from Exile

The journalists who have left Sri Lanka opt for various media related jobs. Some end up working for the already well-established diaspora media. Others have started their own websites individually or collectively.

An organisation called journalist for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) was founded in July 2009 by a group of exiled journalists living in Europe. It now has more than 30 journalists in its ranks. It was JDS who gave the controversial execution footage to Channel 4. Its convenor Bashana Abeyawardene in an interview with the author says he gave the footage to Channel 4 to maximise the impact. JDS continues to work with Channel 4 and other western media organisations. They arrange interviews and sometimes act as translators.

Their blog (<http://www.jdslanka.org>) features news about human rights and journalistic freedom. The organisation helps journalists fleeing Sri Lanka. They work with RSF and lobby for journalists seeking asylum. Many journalists say they left Sri Lanka because of pressure from the government. As a result, most of the stories on the JDS site are highly critical of the government. But Bashana Abeyawardene denies being biased. "As journalists, we cross check the information we get. We will not pass on or publish any information which cannot be authenticated". The Sri Lankan state media conducted a targeted campaign against him and other exiled journalists during March 2012<sup>155</sup>.

In most cases close family members of the exiled journalists continue to live in Sri Lanka. "We are living far away from Sri Lanka so there is no fear for our personal safety. But we know the government can harm our family members", says Abeyawardene. Yet he claims the government campaign has not diminished JDS' news gathering ability.

Language barriers remain a big hurdle for many exile journalists. To overcome this handicap and the resource constraints many journalists form groups to start a website. Another group of exiled journalists have formed the organisation, Network for Rights, NFR. Their website (<http://www.nfrsrilanka.org>) focuses on human rights and media freedom. Since JDS and NFR were founded by exiled journalists, both tend to carry a similar kind of stories.

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<sup>153</sup> <http://cpj.org/2010/03/sri-lankan-attorney-general-assures-exiled-journal.php>

<sup>154</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-less-anti-media-violence-in-2010-30-12-2010,39197.html>

<sup>155</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-government-orchestrated-threats-23-03-2012,42179.html>

The Colombo Telegraph website (<http://www.colombotelegraph.com>) is also run by a group of exiled journalists. Refreshingly it has opinion columns criticising both sides.<sup>156</sup> Another notable website is War without Witness (<http://warwithoutwitness.com>). It documents a number of instances of alleged war crimes with photo and video evidence, giving details like when and where the attacks took place and what happened afterwards. In its mission statement it states it will document only war crimes committed by the government.

Sonali Wickramatunge (who featured in Chapter 3) has now started her own web portal. (<http://www.lankastandard.com>) This website publishes stories that are different from the official version of events and matters concerning journalistic freedom. She is running the site with the help of voluntary contributions.

A large number of journalists in Sri Lanka have few or no academic qualifications. They find it difficult to gain benefits from fellowship programmes which offer mid-career training.

## 5.2 Diaspora Media

Over a million Tamils fled to western countries to escape the civil war. To cater to their needs, a number of TV and radio stations have emerged. During the war the LTTE invested considerable resources to set up a vast media network to promote its cause. It gradually set up TV, radio stations and websites to reach out to the diaspora. A Sri Lankan government document classifies six websites including Tamilnet as being part of the pro LTTE media network. The document also lists seven radio stations, six newspapers and 4 TV channels<sup>157</sup>.

Tamilnet is often referred to as a pro-Tamil Tiger web site. During the war it used to be the first to publish information about the Tamil Tiger's military offensives and casualty figures which would be subsequently picked up and quoted by other media organisations. During the final assault, Tamilnet's Vanni correspondent, A.Lokeesan, stayed on in the war zone and gave regular reports. He now lives in Europe<sup>158</sup>.

After the military defeat of the Tamil Tigers, Tamilnet has published a number of stories highlighting the difficulties faced by Tamils. "We present the Tamil view point to the international community. Our reporters work undercover in Sri Lanka yet manage to file exclusive stories. We bring out stories which are not covered by the other media organisations", says its editor, K. Jeyachandiran.

Tamilnet continues to advocate a separate state solution for the Tamils and continues to justify the armed struggle. But others are changing their way of reporting. A senior journalist working for Deepam TV (UK) claims things are changing slowly. "Now we are reporting events objectively. Only in our analysis you will find a pro-Tamil line. But our audiences are not keen on balanced news. If we air any material critical of the Tigers, many would get angry." Most of the diaspora newspapers are distributed for free in temples and Tamil shops. They make their money through obituaries and matrimonial advertisements. Less ideological sections of the diaspora media are devoting more

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<sup>156</sup> <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-right-to-speak/>

<sup>157</sup> Humanitarian Operation Factual Analysis

<sup>158</sup> <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=34819>

space to Tamil film news and gossip. The vast majority of the diaspora Tamil media organisations tend to be uncritical of the Tamil Tigers.

### 5.3 Web based Journalism and Censorship

About 15% of the Sri Lankan population have access to the internet<sup>159</sup>. Exile journalists and local activists are trying their best to fully exploit this medium. Like elsewhere, people use social networking sites like Facebook and blogs to express their views. Among many dozens of propaganda websites few are dedicated to good journalism and few have made their mark. For over a decade the Canada based Tamil journalist DBS Jayaraj is using the web to propagate a Tamil viewpoint that differs from that of the Tamil Tigers. He regularly contributes to the mainstream English media in Sri Lanka and also to the Chennai based The Hindu newspaper group. Through his website he publishes exclusive stories and communicates directly with his readers.

The Colombo based Groundviews.org, promoted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives proclaims it is a citizen journalism portal. Its coverage of floods in the refugee camps based on the inputs given by citizen journalists was well recognised. Recently there are more articles by academics and fewer posts by citizen journalists. It provides a platform for those supporting the government as well as those who are critical of it. By giving space to both sides, Groundviews is playing a very important mediatory role in post war Sri Lanka. It also took a bold stand against the case of the aggressive Buddhist claim over a mosque. (Buddhists in the central town of Dambulla demanded the closing down of a mosque built in an area designated as sacred zone. The mosque was subsequently fire bombed.<sup>160</sup>) Another organisation promoted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives carried out content analysis of Sri Lankan media and performs the role of an independent appraiser.

The growth of web based journalism is met with the corresponding rise in the desire of the government to control it. During November 2011, the government blocked access to five websites and ordered the compulsory registration of all news websites.<sup>161</sup> The Sri Lankan Supreme Court dismissed petitions challenging the government order, saying “freedom of expression in Sri Lanka is not an absolute right and can be restricted”<sup>162</sup>. Over 40 websites have now been registered as per the regulation.<sup>163</sup> In addition, the cabinet has mandated a registration fee of about US\$750 and an annual renewal fee of US\$375<sup>164</sup>.

Some websites, like the Sri Lanka Guardian and Tamilnet, are permanently blocked.

Groundviews and its partner site, vikalpa, were blocked temporarily in June 2011, along with the Transparency International (anti-corruption watchdog) site. On 25 February 2012, Tamilnet was reportedly hit by Distributed Denial-of-Service attacks, which is a technical attempt to block a site.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>

<sup>160</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17781372>

<sup>161</sup>

[http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2011/11/07/sri\\_lanka\\_blocks\\_5\\_news\\_websites\\_over\\_results/](http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2011/11/07/sri_lanka_blocks_5_news_websites_over_results/)

<sup>162</sup> <http://cpj.org/blog/2012/05/sri-lanka-supreme-court-slams-door-on-websites.php>

<sup>163</sup> [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_12/Mar25\\_1332651502JR.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_12/Mar25_1332651502JR.php)

<sup>164</sup> <http://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=18791>

<sup>165</sup> <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=34927>

Lanka News Web and Lanka-e-News faced similar attacks last year. In October 2011 Sri Lanka's Telecommunication Regulation Commission blocked access within Sri Lanka to the Lanka-e-News website ([www.lankaenews.com](http://www.lankaenews.com)). The US embassy has expressed concern over the ban of these websites<sup>166</sup>.

The Sri Lankan defence ministry issued a directive to media organisations in 2012, asking them to get prior approval before sending SMS news alerts to mobile phone customers with regard to matters of national security and security forces<sup>167</sup>. Sri Lanka has 18 million mobile phone subscribers.

## 5.4 Conclusions

The Sri Lankan government used to ignore the reports from the diaspora press by dismissing them as propaganda. But now the government seems to display increasing hostility towards the news websites as their reach and impact is perceived to be on the increase. These websites are free to access and their revenue is dependent on advertisements. They will find it difficult to pay a registration fee to the government. The government's move to control the internet has earned it a place in the RSF's Enemies of the Internet index<sup>168</sup>.

In future funding will become a crucial issue for the exiled journalists. JDS has received 3,820 Euros from the EU's European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The money was used to launch a new website and to set up the essential infrastructure. The site refuses to accept advertisements and all contributions remain voluntary. Without regular and dependable financial support it would be extremely difficult for the journalists to carry on doing their work. Reporting from a distance also proves to be a formidable challenge. A documentary called 'Silenced Voices' highlights the conditions under which Sri Lankan journalists live and work in exile and has helped to raise their profile<sup>169</sup>. Groundviews which operates from Colombo too got initial funding from the Ford Foundation. It also relied on citizen journalists and voluntary contributors.

Some websites are becoming a good source of information for outsiders as well as for an ever increasing number of Sri Lankans. Intellectuals and other members of civil society use the web to take part in an informed debate. If websites providing alternative perspectives and news about Sri Lanka have to close down due to a lack of funding, it will create an information deficit and make spreading misinformation easier.

During Iran's last presidential election many restrictions were imposed on western media. Yet, with the help of citizen journalists the story was fully covered<sup>170</sup>. The same phenomenon happened during the Arab spring. In Sri Lanka the potential of citizen journalism has not yet fully been tapped into. This may be one of the options to counter government moves to restrict the access journalists have. But for many citizens to come forward the media need to build trust.

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<sup>166</sup> <http://srilanka.usembassy.gov/pr-1nov11.html>

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<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jA7JVzF71EVIsknp6Dxn5orOFNJw?docId=CNG.277eb7c0a5801ccc73a60f7de81e81ce.911>

<sup>168</sup> <http://12mars.rsf.org/2011/en/>

<sup>169</sup> [http://www.fritt-ord.no/en/hjem/mer/en\\_historie\\_om\\_journalister\\_fra\\_sri\\_lanka/](http://www.fritt-ord.no/en/hjem/mer/en_historie_om_journalister_fra_sri_lanka/)

<sup>170</sup> <http://journalism.about.com/od/citizenjournalismworld/tp/iranianuprising.htm>

## 6 Little Hope for Change

Free and vibrant media perform an important role in any functioning democracy. In spite of being a democracy, Sri Lanka has over decades curbed the power of institutions which safeguard democracy through a system of checks and balances - like an independent judiciary and an Election Commission. It has even taken away the power of parliament which - in a functioning democracy - would be a means of curbing the power of the government. Power is now almost exclusively in the hands of members of the Rajapaksa family<sup>171</sup>. The president and his brothers control key ministries which receive over 70 per cent of the national budget<sup>172</sup>. Without the support of other institutions, it is indeed difficult for the media to discharge its duties.

The long civil war has created mistrust between the government and the media. During the critical phase of the war, the government successfully implemented an information embargo and it continues to meddle with the media even after the war. To understand the present state of affairs this research paper formulated two broad questions to assess the overall media environment in Sri Lanka.

- 1) How do journalists feel about their own safety and the overall media environment in the country?
- 2) Do journalists feel they are able to play a role in the post war reconciliation efforts?

The main conclusions of this study are:

- 1) There is some improvement with regard to the physical safety of journalists. The government has withdrawn restrictions imposed on the movement of journalists into northern parts of the country.
- 2) Lack of media freedom undermines the ability of journalists to play a meaningful role in the reconciliation efforts.
- 3) The militarisation of society, the lack of independence within the judiciary and a largely dysfunctional parliament are other factors that have an adverse impact on media freedom.
- 4) Sri Lankan journalists in exile are vigorously pursuing war crime stories. To an extent their work influences both the domestic and international media. A lack of regular and dependable financial support is a major limiting factor for the reporting by journalists in exile.
- 5) The reporting by international media, in particular by the British broadcaster Channel 4, helps to keep the international focus on Sri Lanka. The government has responded by mounting its own counter media campaign.
- 6) Many victims of the war feel disillusioned and let down by the media. As the case studies show, those who need media support the most, hardly get any.
- 7) The government has created structures to monitor and manipulate the media within and outside of Sri Lanka. These structures may outlive the present government. They pose a long term challenge to media freedom.

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<sup>171</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/21547252>

<sup>172</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/sri-lanka>

The main hope for the immediate future lies with the international media. Through their reporting on allegations of war crimes and human rights violations they have swung international opinion against Sri Lanka, but the impact on the domestic political process remains limited. But there remains the chance that in the long run, the continuous focus on Sri Lanka by the international media will force the current government under the leadership of President Rajapaksa to return freedom and democracy to all of the Sri Lankan people.

While reporting a war, it is very important for journalists to make extra efforts to report the consequences of war on civilians. By encouraging both communities to share their sufferings the media would be able to bring out the true cost of war. This may ultimately lead to reconciliation.

## 6.1 Recommendations

1. Journalists must spare some thought for the hapless population that got caught in the cross fire. The media need to create space to give voice to the voiceless. The best way of doing this is by filing personal stories.
2. During the civil war, journalists were deliberately targeted and frequently killed. In such scenarios there is a need for the international media to be proactively involved. To be in the focus of the international media may not stop the war or improve the security of the local journalists but will thwart the attempts of a government to suppress information. With the rapid spread of citizen journalism, it should be possible to get factual inputs from any region.
3. There is a need to create an institutional mechanism involving media rights organisations, international non-governmental organisations, journalism schools and donors to provide financial help and professional and linguistic training to journalists who flee from conflict zones.

## 7 Acronyms

ABC	- Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ANCL	- Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited
BBC	- British Broadcasting Corporation
CID	- Criminal Investigation Department
CPJ	- Committee to Protect Journalists
EIDHR	- European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EU	- European Union
FMM	- Free Media Movement
HRW	- Human Rights Watch
ICG	- International Crisis Group
IPS	- Inter Press Service
JDS	- Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka
JVP	- Sri Lankan People's Liberation Front or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LLRC	- Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission
LTTE	- Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
RSF	- Reporters without borders
SLBC	- Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation
TNA	- Tamil National Alliance
UNHRC	- United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	- United Nations Children's Fund

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