

Arbetsrapport nr. 41

In whose interest?

A study of journalists' views of their responsibilities and possibilities
within the mainstream press in Sri Lanka

Anna Bolin

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Summary

The press is often seen as a key actor for a democratic process and development, though two decades of armed conflict as well as the effects of the tsunami in 2004 has badly affected all parts of the society, including the media. The media has failed to remain independent during these critical moments and a recent report showed the press to be politicised and biased in their reporting. As a result of this democracy, Human Rights, gender and minority issues get insufficient coverage (A study of media in Sri Lanka 2005:42ff). This is a challenge to the press in Sri Lanka.

With this in mind the aim of this thesis has been *to investigate the journalists' image of what role the press should have and could have in the Sri Lankan society*. The empirical research was conducted during a seven-week visit to Colombo and is based primarily on interviews with 18 journalists (reporters and news editors) in six mainstream newspapers. The newspapers were selected to get as many views as possible and journalists working in Sinhala, Tamil and English newspapers were interviewed. Three of the newspapers were state owned and three of the newspapers were owned by private media establishments.

My first main question was *to see how the journalists' look upon their role and responsibility*. The roles according to the journalists were to inform, educate and guide the society for the better. Furthermore they should show on solutions and alternatives, stand between people and politicians (though it was rather about passing on information than acting as a watch-dog), and care about Tamil interest (according to a Tamil journalist). When, asked about the concepts of working in the public interest and taking social responsibility, the journalists disagreed on the definition of public interest rather than social responsibility. Public interest was defined as working in the interest of the whole society (with focus on educating and informing people to do right), writing about what concerns ordinary people, and being a watch-dog exposing corruption (or telling people what the government do with their tax money). Naturally everybody thought it was important to take social responsibility, which was primarily defined as raising awareness about social problems in the society. Though some of them, especially journalists in the state owned newspaper thought they rather worked in the interest of the politicians than the public. Many also did not think they were taking the social responsibility they could.

The second main question was to see *what views the journalists' holds of what stories the public wants and needs*. The journalists often said everything was important, but there was a strong focus on politics. They though thought the press should write more about social problems, but that was not thought to attract the readers. Rather politics was seen as both interesting and important. The public was according to the journalists also interested in gossip, sex and human interest stories though some thought you have to think about the consequences. The result suggests there is a gap between the articles about social problems people need to know about and the politics and gossip they want. Interestingly the public was rarely asked for their opinion. Even though some of the newspapers conducted surveys (on their existing readers) the result disappeared somewhere into a market department and are not further discussed in the news room. As long as the circulation was not going down there was a belief you had good quality.

The third main question was to see *what obstacles the journalists' are experiencing when working according to the ideal*. The journalists mainly saw problems in the external environment such as the fact there is always a political agenda (mainly journalists at the state

owned newspapers), threats (strongly pointed out by Tamil journalists) and lack of correct information (a common problem for all journalists). Interestingly cultural influences were not seen as a problem and few talked about pressure from advertisers. Problems within the organisations were mainly the policy of the ownership, a strong tradition of self-censorship, appointments of unqualified personnel (the two latter especially in the state owned newspapers), routines like early deadlines and a tradition of “telephone journalism” (pointed out by the newcomers). Only one journalist mentioned community feelings within the news room and few saw lack of language skills as a real problem. Few mentioned individual problems, like for instance poor journalistic or language skills.

The journalists mainly expressed the same opinion of the press as formulated in the policy documents they are said to follow; the Code of Ethics and the Media Charter. These stresses the press should be sensitive to the needs of the reader, work in the public interest, take social responsibility and generally uphold a high international standard. This is though the ideal role the press *should* have in the society, though the reality looks different.

When it comes to what role they *could* have the picture is more scattered. The interpretations and examples of what it means to work in the public interest and to take responsibility. Also the obstacles they face in their every-day work reveal differed but generally raised several problematic aspects of a free and independent press, which is seen as necessary if it ought to work for a democratic process.

To sum up, there were several issues that need to be highlighted and brought into discussion in the news room, such as community feelings or the definition of truth. There is also an urgent need about *how* rather than *why* public interest and social responsibility is taken. Finally there is also a need for a raised understanding and discussion about the public’s wants and needs.

Abstract

Titel: In whose interest?

A study of journalists' view of their responsibilities and possibilities within the main stream press in Sri Lanka.

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Supervisor: Phil. Dr. Ingela Wadbring

Course: Master Course, Media and Communication, Spring 2006

Aim: The aim is to investigate the journalists' image of what role the press should have and could have in the Sri Lankan society.

Method: Eighteen in-depth interviews with journalists (news editors and reporters) at six main stream newspapers in all three languages in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Three state owned newspapers; The Dinamina, Thinakaran and Daily News. Three private newspapers; Lankadeepa, Virakesari and The Sunday Leader.

Main result:

Generally the journalists expressed the same opinion of the press as formulated in the policy documents they are said to follow; the Code of Ethics and the Media Charter. These stresses the press should be sensitive to the needs of the reader, work in the public interest, take social responsibility and generally uphold a high international standard. This is the ideal role the press *should* have in the society, though the reality looks different. Some of the journalist, especially working in the state owned newspaper thought they were rather working in the interest of the politicians than the public. Many also do not think they are taking social responsibility they could.

When it comes to what role they *could* have the picture is more scattered. The interpretations and examples of what it means to work in the public interest and to take responsibility. Also the obstacles differed between the newspapers. This could be a political agenda, threats, lack of access to correct information, a strong tradition of self-censorship, appointments of unqualified personnel, early deadlines and a tradition of "telephone journalism". This raises problematic aspects of a free and independent press, which is seen as necessary if it ought to work for a democratic process.

To sum up, there were several issues that need to be highlighted and brought into discussion in the news room, such as community feelings or the definition of truth. There is also an urgent need about *how* rather than why public interest and social responsibility is taken. Finally there is also a need for a raised understanding and discussion about the public's wants and needs.

Abbreviations

CPA - Centre for Policy Alternatives: Works with policy options to inform and shape the practice and culture of good governance, including media freedom, the public's right to know and freedom of expression in Sri Lanka (www.cpalanka.org).

EGSL - Editors Guild of Sri Lanka: Consists of 18 editors and aims to protect editorial independence, freedom of the press and high professional journalistic standards. EGSL has been involved in legislative reforms and has a few times worked for media freedom (A Study of the Media in Sri Lanka 2005:37).

FMM - Free Media Movement: A non partisan independent group of journalists, newspaper editors and media personalities working with media freedom, legislative reforms and stands for principles of democratic and human rights (www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/23236/).

Fojo – The Institute for Further Education of Journalists: Is part of University of Kalmar and holds courses in to further educate working journalists and has an international cooperation with SIDA (www.fo.hik.se).

LTTE - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam: Tamil guerrilla fighting for a sovereign state in North of Sri Lanka.

PCCSL - Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka: Is part of SLPI and a self-regulatory body for the print media of Sri Lanka.

SIDA – The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency: A government agency under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs which aims to improve living conditions for poor people (www.sida.se).

SLCJ - Sri Lanka College of Journalism: Is part of SLPI and offers the first and only one-year full time diploma course in journalism in Sri Lanka.

SLFP - Sri Lanka Freedom Party: One of the two major parties together with UNP, democratic left-wing party.

SLPI - Sri Lanka Press Institute: Established in 2004 and consists of the Press Complaints Commission and the Sri Lanka College of Journalism (http://fojointernational.fo.hik.se/fojo_international/projects).

SLWJA - Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association: Has around 800 memberships and is mainly concerned with more practical issues as journalists' welfare, pension and discounts (A Study of the Media in Sri Lanka 2005:37).

The Newspaper (Publishers Society): Work for high journalistic standards and media freedom within the press and consists of six members; the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, Wijeya Newspapers Limited, Upali Newspapers Limited, Sumathi Newspapers (Pvt) Limited, Leader Publications (Pvt) Limited and Express Newspapers Limited (A Study of the Media in Sri Lanka, p. 37).

UNP - United National Party: One of the two major parties, centre-right.

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Introduction

At lunchtime the 25 of April 2006 a Tamil woman walks in to the army headquarters and detonates a bomb she is carrying around her waist. She slips through the security check as she looks pregnant. She is a suicide bomber of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), who fights for a Tamil autonomy in the North-East of Sri Lanka. More than ten people are killed and the target of the attack, the army commander gets seriously injured. During the afternoon and evening the army performs bomb raids in the North and East territories of Sri Lanka. Violence escalates with more bombs, which results in that more than ten thousand people leave their homes. LTTE and the government continue to blame each other and even though there is a ceasefire agreement since 2002 the violence slowly escalates. On the 29 of May this year EU brand LTTE as a terrorist organisation. As a result of this the Tamil Tigers, who just accepted a peace talk in Oslo in the beginning of June, proclaim they now might have to go to war. The situation and possibilities to reach a peace agreement after more than 20 years of civil war looks darker and darker (Articles; TT-AFP 060530, DN-Reuters 060427, DN 060429, DN 060512).

During the suicide bomb attack I was in Colombo to conduct research for this thesis. The day after the attack three of the newspapers in Colombo publish the torn off head and name of the suicide bomber. Being used to Swedish newspapers this chocked me. A journalist explained to me that people are used to this. She also thought it was in the public interest since rumours said she was beautiful and people were curious about what she looked like. A news editor working in another paper openly admitted it sells more papers. In the evening of the attack the president urged, in a press release held in front of the camera, the media to be careful in their reporting.

Two decades of armed conflict with more than 65 000 people killed together with the tragic loss of more than 30 000 people in the tsunami 2004 has affected all parts of the society, including the media. Press, an also radio and TV have failed to remain independent during these critical moments and a recent report showed the press to be politicised and biased in their reporting. As a result of this democracy, Human Rights, gender and minority issues get insufficient coverage (A study of media in Sri Lanka 2005:42ff).

A democratic media is free and independent, follows ethnic guidelines and puts the public in the first place (UNDP 2002:7f). Media is more and more seen as a key actor for democracy and development, which in turn is considered to be essential when fighting poverty - the main goal of the United Nations Millennium Declaration (www.un.org/millenniumgoals). The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) who gives media aid to Sri Lanka, believes media should empower people, raise knowledge and promote creativity, self-esteem and identification (www.sida.se:1). Still, a democratic press demands a democratic society. This is a true challenge to the press in Sri Lanka.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the journalists' image of what role the press should have and could have in the Sri Lankan society. What is their ideal role, how do they interpret public interest and social responsibility, what stories do they think people want and need and what obstacles do they face in their work and which may prevent them from working according to their ideal?

As a way to address the problems, the first independent journalism institute - the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI) was established in 2004. The institute, who acted as my host during my

time in Colombo, is among others financed by SIDA and started after an initiative from organisations in Sri Lanka; the Free Media Movement, the Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka and the Editors' Guild. The institute consists of Sri Lanka College of Journalism, the Press Complaints Commission, and the Swedish organisation Fojo (The Institute for Further Education of Journalists) as an institutional partner. SLPI should also contribute to a public discussion about the media in the country and this study is therefore in their interest and also planned in cooperation with representatives from the institute.

I spent seven weeks in Colombo to do a Minor Field Study financed by SIDA. During my stay I conducted eighteen in-depth interviews with journalists (in this thesis I include reporters and news editors) from six mainstream newspapers. The newspapers were all based in Colombo, with national circulation. Three of the newspapers were owned by the state; The Dinamina, Thinakaran and Daily News, and three of them were private; Lankadeepa, Virakesari and The Sunday Leader. All of them are daily newspapers except from The Sunday Leader, which is a weekly.

I have found studies in other Asian countries that touches my subject, but not for Sri Lanka. According to many researchers (Romano and Bromley 2005, Duncan McCargo 2003) there is a lack of a deeper understanding of the media situation in Asia and especially its close connection to politics. A lot of the literature in the subject is Eurocentric, with theories derived in the Western world. These theories are considered of limited relevance to non-western countries. Writing this essay has been sort of "zigzag" my way through, with the hopes to contribute to some new aspects of the field.

I am aware that this thesis is more extensive than what usually is the case for a ten-week thesis, but the context is different in many ways. I could also not expect the reader to know anything about Sri Lanka. I will therefore start by giving a basic introduction to the country and the media situation. I will continue with a presentation of my theoretical framework which focuses on democracy, media's ideal role in society, definitions of public interest and a journalistic versus a market-driven journalism. Furthermore, I will discuss what consequences different approaches may have on the media content and factors that might influence the media production. After a more detailed description of my aim and main questions I will present the methodological choices I have done and reflect upon how this may have influenced the results of the thesis. Result and analysis is divided in three parts each answering one of my main questions. I then continue with a discussion highlighting interesting results and thoughts which may have been not spotlighted in my analysis. Finally I end with a discussion.

My meeting with Sri Lanka has been a bit scary, wonderful and most of the times extremely interesting. Moreover, it has been a true challenge trying to understand the complexity of the press in the country.

About Sri Lanka

I will start by giving a short introduction to the country Sri Lanka since I believe a basic knowledge, especially about the conflict and the political situation, is essential to understand what role media at all should and could play in today's Sri Lanka.

Ethnicity, language and religion

Sri Lanka is a mix when it comes to ethnicities and religions. Three quarters of the about 19 millions inhabitants are Sinhalese, 18 % are Tamils (divided in Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils, and one percent are Moors, Burghers and Veddahs. Around 650 000 live in the capital Colombo. Biggest religion is Buddhism (69 %), thereafter Hinduism (15 %), Christianity (8%) and Islam (8%) (Geographica 2000:166). Sri Lanka has religious freedom but the constitution states that Buddhism should be promoted. Official languages are Sinhalese and Tamil. About ten percent of the population speaks English, which is the language also used mostly by the government (Landguiden 2006:2ff).

Social and culture situation

Even if Sri Lanka is a poor country, it distinguishes itself from many other developing countries. The educational level is comparatively high, about nine out of ten can read and write. GNP is double as high as for instance India and the healthcare is free of charge and considered rather efficient (which has resulted in low infant mortality and high average lifetime). Though the gap between rich and poor has increased the last decades and about a fourth of the population lives on less than one dollar a day (the limit for extreme poverty). Furthermore women are often being discriminated, prostitution (many children) is a big problem, and criminality is the highest in South Asia. Sri Lanka also has the highest suicide rate in the world. Moreover the country has cast system determining among other things your chances of career and choice of partner. Discrimination because of cast is not allowed, but often considered important within many areas, especially in politics (Landguiden 2006:3f, 28).

Economy

Sri Lanka is not one of the poorest countries in Asia but the conflict has slowed down the development. The economy is based on agriculture and biggest export commodities have traditionally been tea, coconuts and rubber. The textile industry, service sector and tourism are today the most important industries. IT and Telecom is growing and a lot of money is also coming in to the country from people working abroad. Still Sri Lanka suffers from budget deficit, is dependent on international aid and has been forced to borrow money from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Landguiden 2006:23f). Sweden has given aid to Sri Lanka since 1958 and the country is today on SIDA's "top-twenty" list over cooperation countries (the term used today). Sweden's development work in Sri Lanka focuses on peace, democracy, economic development and Human Rights (www.sida.se:2).

Politics

Sri Lanka is a republic and regarded as a relatively democratic country, still there are many reports on corruption and political violence. The highest organ is the parliament with 225 members. The president elected on a six years period has a lot of power and can appoint and

fire ministers, dissolve the parliament and give notice of referendum. The parliament can also appoint the government (Landguiden 2006:6f).

Two parties have dominated the political field since the independence, SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party), a leftwing party and UNP (United National Party), centre-right which is supported by domestic business interests. There are some smaller parties on both sides, representing the Muslims, Tamils and Buddhist monks, as well as the extremist Singhalese party JVP which has a violent past. After the latest elections in 2004, SLFP formed a coalition parliament. In presidential election in November last year, Mahinda Rajapakse became president and Ratnasiri Wickremanayake received the post as Prime Minister (Landguiden 2006:6f).

The constitution guarantees basic freedom and rights. It also gives the government the right to restrict these freedoms if harmony between ethnic groups and religions are threatened. This has been quite frequently used throughout the years. Offences against Human Rights are also “disappearances” and killings, especially during the end of the 1980s (Landguiden 2006:7f).

History – conflict in focus

My short historical overview starts at the beginning of the colonial era. Europeans got interested in the island because of the trade of spices and Sri Lanka was colonized by three different countries. In the beginning of the 16th century the Portuguese invaded the country, they were driven away by the Dutch in the middle of the 17th century. Finally the British took over in the first years of the 19th century. The British colonizers changed the economic and social systems in many ways; the state organs were centralized, the country went from being self supporting on rice to dependent on export of tea and rubber, a new school system was introduced, the infrastructure was developed, and medical care improved. As a reaction against the colonization and the carrying out of the Christian religion, Buddhist-national political elite movements were formed to protect among other things the traditional Buddhist culture. Sri Lanka finally gained independence in February 1948 (Landguiden 2006:9f, Höglund and Svensson 2002:3f).

The period after independence could be characterized by riots, insurrections and an increasing ethnic conflict. In the end of the 1940s Tamils, who had come from South India to work on the tea plantations loss their citizenship (Höglund and Svensson 2002:5). In 1956 the government of SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) decided Sinhala was the official language and Buddhism state religion, two expressions of the nationalistic feelings. This caused riots in 1956 between Singhalese and Tamils (Landguiden 2006:10). The restrictions of the Tamil language, education and culture are today regarded as the breeding ground of the conflict between the Singhalese and Tamils (Höglund and Svensson 2002:3ff).

More violence followed. In 1971 unemployed, educated youths led by a militant extremist movement, revolted. In a week more than 20 000 youths were killed by the police and army. The political situation stayed unstable throughout the 1970s and the economic situations got worse; the depths increased as well as the gap between rich and poor (Landguiden 2006:11).

Also in the beginning of the 1970s a quotation system for University was introduced, which resulted in Tamil students having a harder time to enter University. Slowly minor radical and militant Tamil movements established and one of them was LTTE - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Landguiden 2006:11). The claim of LTTE has from the beginning been a

sovereign state. Although, since the beginning of the 1990s the guerrilla has expressed a possibility they will accept some kind of loose confederation (Höglund and Svensson 2002:10).

Over two decades of civil war

The tension between LTTE and the Sinhala government increased and culminated in the summer of 1983. In July that year LTTE killed a couple of policemen in Jaffna, a city in the North of Sri Lanka. When the dead bodies of the policemen returned to Colombo, a riot against the Tamils broke out in the capital. The police did not do anything to protect the Tamil minority and the president blamed everything on the Tamil community in a speech on national Television. Over 1 000 Tamils were killed and more than 100 000 (another source says more than 150 000) escaped to the North of Sri Lanka or to the South of India. This was the starting point for a complicated, violent and bloody civil war which would continue for twenty years (Höglund and Svensson 2002:6f).

The Sinhalese have been sceptical to the establishment of a sovereign Tamil state. One reason is because of the role of India, both as facilitator of LTTE and also due to the role of India in the peace process. South India host about 50 million Indian Tamils and the government in the area of Tamil Nadu, South India, has close connections to among others the LTTE. South India is for hundred of years back regarded as the largest threat to Sri Lanka and the Sinhalese culture. The Sinhalese are therefore afraid to become a minority in the region (Höglund and Svensson 2002:11).

One peace negotiation follows the other

The first peace agreement was signed in 1987 after India acting as negotiation part. According to the agreement among other things 130 000 Tamil refugees would be transported back to Sri Lanka from India and Tamil and English would be equal Sinhala as official language. Though, the agreement collapsed and resulted in India becoming militant part against the Tamils (Landguiden 2006:12). JVP a militant party active in the southern regions of Sri Lanka were also strongly against the Indian intervention. In 1987-89 the JVP terrorised the country killing civilians and destroying property. At the beginning a lot of Sinhalese supported the group, but in 1989 the government hit back and killed two of the leaders of JVP. In 1990 when JVP was beaten by the government over 40 000 people had been killed by JVP or the security forces (Landguiden 2006:12).

Between killings, bomb attacks and political internal problems several more initiatives to peace were taken over the years, but all failed. In 2002 when LTTE and the UNP government signed the ceasefire agreement over 60 000 people had lost their lives (Landguiden 2006:16). In practice, as mentioned in the introduction, this agreement has been broken time after time.

A problem for peace negotiations has also been internal problems within the former government. The previous president representing SLFP and the earlier prime ministers representing the dominating party UNP had different opinions of how to solve the conflict. In 2003, while the prime minister was meeting Bush in USA, the president fired three ministers who were main responsible for the peace talks as well as dissolved the parliament and instituted state of civil emergency (Landguiden 2006:18).

New general election was announced in April 2004 four years before expected and the winner was SLFP. A couple of days later representatives of LTTE and the army agreed under

Norwegian supervision to continue suspension of arms. Though in July the same year a suicide bomber detonated herself in central Colombo killing four policemen (Landguiden 2006:19).

On the 26th of December 2004 Sri Lanka was badly hit by the tsunami. Over 30 000 people were killed and hundred thousands of people became homeless (and many still are). Worst off were the South and East coasts. Instead to cooperate at this critical moment, both sides accused each other for breaking the ceasefire agreement. In June 2005 the government and LTTE finally agreed on a plan to rebuild the country (Landguiden 2006:20).

The situation today

In 22-23 February this year, the government and LTTE met for peace talk in Geneva trying to save the more and more neglected ceasefire agreement. In a couple of months more than 150 persons had lost their lives. The parts agreed on respecting the ceasefire agreement and to meet again for a second talk in 19th of April (Article; GP:060317).

During my time in the country the situation changed. LTTE did not agree on the transportation to the second round and said they would not participate (Article DN 2005-04-29). The violence accelerated after the suicide attack mentioned in the introduction. (Article DN 2006-04-27). Nobody knows what will happen next and the way to peace has been everything but straight.

To sum up, even though LTTE has a big support within the Tamil community, I believe it is important to point out the fact that Tamils are critical to the LTTE, due to the lack of democracy within the organisation, the brutal methods and (which has also received a lot of international critics) the recruit and use of large groups of child soldiers (Höglund and Svensson 2002:9f).

Media in Sri Lanka with focus on the press

In this part I will give a short overview of the development of the media in Sri Lanka, what the situation looks like today as well as an overview of media consumption in the country.

As mentioned I will interview journalists at six different newspapers, all based in Colombo with national circulation; The Dinamina, Thinakaran and Daily News owned by the Lake House, Lankadeepa owned by Wijeya Newspapers Ltd, Virakesari owned by the Express Group and the weekly The Sunday Leader owned by Leader.

Sri Lanka do not have an evening press like Sweden, instead there are dailies and weeklies. Generally the weeklies have some more feature articles and reportage than dailies. And while all the daily newspapers cost 15 rupees (less than 1SEK) you have to pay double for the weekly. So far there is nothing like *Metro*, free newspaper, which is a common sight in Sweden.

A short historical retrospect

With the history of Sri Lanka in mind it is not surprising there is a strong bond between media and politics. When radio was introduced in the beginning of the 1920s it was first owned by the state, later called the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). Television was introduced in 1979 and was for the first month run by the private Independent Television Network, but soon taken under state control since it was believed to have a strong impact. During the first 25 years after independence the press was in the opposite run by private establishments. But whereas broadcast opened up for private interests in the 1990s, the biggest newspaper establishment ANCL - Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (more often referred to as Lake House which is the term I will use in this essay), stay under the control of government since the take-over in the 1970s (Peiris 1997:84ff).

Sri Lanka has a long press history. The first printing press was set up by the Dutch in 1737, though the first regularly produced newspaper, the weekly Government Gazette, was established by the British in the beginning of the 19th century. Lots of newspapers followed and the press was largely unregulated in to the 1970s, although the newspapers were pro-Western and pro-Christian, mostly driven by and for the British colonisers. The Sinhala press began its era in 1860 in the province of Galle, in the south of Sri Lanka. It was in opposite to the British press pro-nationalistic and pro-Buddhist. The first Tamil newspaper was established in the 1841 had a religious and ethno-nationalist orientation. Later on Tamil newspapers were also found with the aim of Hindu revivalism (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:184f).

By the end of the British colonization the press was dominated by two private newsgroups; the Associated Newspaper of Ceylon Ltd (Lake House) which had newspapers in all three languages and the Times of Ceylon Ltd, which had newspapers in English and Sinhalese (they made a try to also publish in Tamil). In the 1960s the newly started Independent Newspapers Ltd became a serious competitor. The establishment was close to the SLFP party and with dailies and weeklies in all three languages. Another newspaper group, the Express Newspapers Ltd, specialized in Tamil newspapers and in 1995 they also started to publish an English weekly (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:185f).

After independence the state control of the media increased and in 1973 the SLFP-coalition took control over the Lake House Group, which until then had been close to the UNP party. The state owned newspapers of the Lake House are since then following whatever party is in charge. This contributed to a highly partisan media culture in Sri Lanka which the country is still trying to come out of. Especially in times of elections, media becomes a tool for the different parties. In the end of the 1970s the UNP regime in power also took control of The Times of Ceylon groups of newspapers and the Independent Television Network (ITN). At this time Independent Newspapers Ltd closed due to mainly economic problems, consequently the UNP regime had almost total control of the entire media (Nohrstedt, Bastian and Höök 2002:11). In the 1980s two new competitors with modern printing presses entered the market; Upali Newspapers Ltd and Wijeya Newspapers Ltd (Gunaratne and Wattergama 2000:187).

The present structure of the press

There are today seven large private establishments that publish daily newspapers and weekend newspapers in all three main languages (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:6). In the end of the 20th century three newspaper groups dominated the scene; ANCL under governmental control, the Upali Newspapers Ltd (privately owned and with strong family connections to both UNP and SLFP) and the Wijeya Newspapers Ltd (private owned with strong connections to UNP). A fourth actor is the Express group (Gunaratne and Wattergama 2000:187, 193).

Lake House is the biggest newspaper establishment and runs around 20 publications in all three main languages. It has the broadest distribution network and is also the only establishment with provincial offices with full-time staff, although their influence in the media institutions is considered minimal (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:6, 19). There have been discussions on governmental level to privatise the Lake House, but so far nothing has happened. Instead, in 2004 the former president took control of the Ministry of Mass communication, with the consequence that all the state media institutions came under presidential control (Eliatamby 2004:31).

Mainstream newspapers are all based in Colombo and have to more or less extent national circulation. In relation to other developing countries where regional and community media often plays an important role, Sri Lanka has very little regional and local media. There are some regional papers in Kandy (central Sri Lanka) and Jaffna (North) (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:10, 15).

A feature of the press in Sri Lanka is also the existence of alternative press. For example politically oriented periodicals, tabloids published by the big newspaper groups targeting special interest groups like sports enthusiasts, women, children, business and movie fans. The political parties also publish official organs (Peiris 1997:100).

Financial situation

Although the advertising revenues are increasing, only around 25 percent of the ad spending is in newspapers or magazines, while television gets 40 percent, radio 25 percent and others 10 percent. The top advertising categories in 2002 were banking and finance, consumer goods, employment, IT, auto, education, entertainment, alcohol, travel and leisure (World Press Trends 2005:606f). The advertisement in the newspaper has declined from about 40

percent in 1995 to 25 percent in 2005. The state owned media received almost half of the advertising in the press (Gunaratne and Wattedgama 2000:192).

In Sri Lanka most newspapers sell on free-copies. In 2002, 60 percent of the newspaper sales were single copy, 35 percent home deliveries and 5 percent postal deliveries. (World Press Trends 2005:606f). There are different opinions on whether the production has increased, but the owner of the Wijeya Newspapers Ltd Ranjit Wijewardene, said in a speech on the World Press Freedom day 2001 the costs for the newspaper had increased with over 24 percent that year. Consequently, the newspaper tries to limit the size of the newspaper and the circulation since they do not see any other way to survive (Wijewardene 2001:38f).

Legal framework

Some of the more important laws regulating the press are:

ANCL Law from 1973 when the government took over the Lake House group. According to the law the stocks should be shared among the public, which has so far not happened. Instead the government has used the monopoly to influence the content of the newspapers of the Lake House (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:29).

Sri Lanka Press Council Law, also from 1973 aims to ensure press freedom, high ethical standards and free flow of information. It also says the government can prohibit publications due to national security, obscenity and profanity, official secrets etcetera. Press Council as an institution has been abolished since it was ineffective (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:30). In 2003 Press Complaints Commission (PCCSL) was established as part of the Sri Lanka Press Institute working as a self-regulation of the media (<http://fojointernational.fo.hik.se>).

Official Secrets Act, from 1955 applies to everyone and is believed to lead to self-censor. It states it is an offence for anyone who holds official secret to communicate it to someone with whom the state does not want to communicate. This means things which should be open to debate, for example regarding defence or corruption may not always reach the public (A study of the Media in Sri Lanka 2005:31).

Emergency regulations gives the president the right to implement regulations that he or she thinks is necessary to protect the public or harmony between different groups. In case of emergency the law take precedence over all other laws excluding the Constitution. It has been one of the strongest ways for censorship, restrictions for media freedom and publicity (A study of the Media in Sri Lanka 2005:30).

There is not yet a *Free Flow of Information Bill*. A bill has been prepared but is still not in practise. The transparency is insufficient and according to an expert on media laws, Niresh Eliatamby, many officials do not speak to the journalists in less they have a written permission from the ministry which takes weeks to get (Eliatamby 2004:31). Some also say there is a culture of secrecy in Sri Lanka, which means that even though you have the information it is not sure that you want to share it with others (Javid Yusuf 2001:36).

Self-regulation

The Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL) started in 2003 as a part of the Sri Lanka Press Institute. The aim is to with a “fast, free and fair service” ensure a free and

responsible press in Sri Lanka. PCCSL is influenced by the Press Complaints Commission in the United Kingdom and Sweden. It is open for people who believe they have been mistreated in the press or when the Code of ethics is broken. PCCSL has representatives in all three languages; Sinhala, Tamil and English and has since the start received 420 cases (112 complaints were made in last year mainly from the general public, Annual report 2005:7). The most common complaints concerned inaccurate or false information and most of the times in Sinhala newspapers. Most often settlement was arranged directly with the editor through conciliation and an excuse be published in the newspaper. When the parts do not agree the case is settled through arbitration. Anyway, the problem should be solved within a month (Ameen Hussein 2006-04-03).

Sri Lankan journalists

There are approximately 4000 working journalists in Sri Lanka (a number that differs between different sources), half of them employed by media institutions on full-time basis and the other working as provincial correspondents. The work force is still very male dominated and the female journalists have limited opportunities in the news room (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:6, 44).

There are journalistic education within some of the universities, semi-government institutions and privately run institutions, but these programmes and courses lack possibilities of practical training and are therefore not seen as very useful by the majority of the newspapers (Norstedt, Bastian och Hök 2002:13f) The first independent journalist institute was the Sri Lanka College of Journalism (part of the Sri Lanka Press Institute) established on the initiative of the industry itself in 2004. The college runs one-year fulltime diploma-course in journalism in all three languages, as well as shorter mid-career courses for practicing journalists in subjects from news room management, aspects of globalization, how to report for the young audience, to courses in intermediate English (www.fo.hik.se).

There are differences in education and working conditions for provincial reporters and Colombo based journalists. Interviews conducted by Centre for Policy Alternatives among provincial journalists revealed that the provincial journalists have not received any training from the media institutions or the NGO sector (which more usually conduct training programmes), including initial training. Nor have they received a copy of the professional code of conduct from their respective media organizations or training on the code of ethics (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:19f).

Public access and readership

In Asia the number of newspaper titles increased with five percent between 2000 and 2004, and the circulation in the same period rose with around 11 percent (in opposite to the Western world). This is explained by; growing population, more people can read, more people can afford it, and the infrastructure is improving (World Press Trends 2005:8).

A closer look at Sri Lanka shows that even if the literacy rate is 85-90 percent (slightly higher for men than for women), which is unusually high for being a developing country, the number of titles and circulation has slightly declined. The readership and circulation is also low in comparison to countries like for instance India which has higher circulation but lower literacy rate (World Press Trends 2005:52, 605ff) One of the reasons is believed to be that the price is relatively higher than in other developing countries (A study of Media in Sri Lanka 2005:11). According to the Sri Lankan researcher Peiris three reasons could also be that television is

getting more popular, the once most popular newspapers of the Lake House were taken over by the government and the ongoing conflict (Peiris 1997:84).

There is a lack of data of media habits, who reads the newspaper, how long, what they read and why. The only data which do exists is from a survey conducted 1995/96 (excluding North and East), when more than 1 300 persons were asked about their knowledge, attitudes, practices and needs in relation to the press, radio, TV and public posters. The research showed about a third of the people read newspapers regularly (more than four times a week), a third read it occasionally and one third say they never read it. Still, the survey does say how long time spent on reading. The most common reason for not reading the newspaper was lack of time (over half of the respondents stated this reason) and the price which they could not afford (over 40 percent) (Samarasinghe 1997:265-295).

The survey further showed men were more regular readers than women, but that women are more frequent readers of Sunday weeklies. This was explained by the fact they then have more time and access. The family more often buy the newspaper on weekends and many women work at home and do not have access in the workplace as do men. The study also showed there is no big difference between urban and rural areas, which is often the case in many developing countries. People with higher education were also more frequent readers, but interestingly 17 percent and respectively 31 percent of the people from the lowest socio-economic groups (“ultra-poor” and “poor” according to the researchers’ classification) read the newspapers regularly. Young readers also tended to be less frequent readers (Samarasinghe 1997:265-295).

In the survey private press was more popular than newspapers of the Lake House. Newspapers as Lankadeepa and Virakesari were considered more reliable and less biased. Only three percent said they read English newspapers. On the question on what they read people said they prefer domestic non-political news (like crime and human-interest issues), secondly about the ethnic conflict and thereafter about national political news and entertainment. Only five percent (but this is also overlapping the first category) liked to read more commentary feature articles about social issues like for instance poverty, religion, health and education (articles meant to educate people). To sum up, Samarsinghe writes the newspapers must think about how they ought to package the more serious news in a more attractive way (Samarasinghe 1997:265-295).

A personal reflection is that the study mentioned above is ten years old. A lot of things have happened which could also be reflected in people’s media consumption, their habits, attitudes, needs and wants. Further more there is no annual statistics over circulation and readership in Sri Lanka and there is a gap between circulation figures offered by the newspapers and how much people spend on newspaper (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:191, Peiris 1997:83). The lack of reliable statistic data means figures must not be taken too seriously. I also question the classification which seems to overlap each other. How could you also be sure if people say this is what they want, since that is what they get?

Theoretical framework

I have decided to structure my theoretical framework in three different parts, equivalent to my three main questions. After a short introduction follows the first part which focuses on normative aspects of media in connection to democracy and a journalistic mission, as well as the concept of public interest. The second part focuses on aspects of the content and what at all could be identified as important or interesting, depending if you have a journalistic or market-driven approach. Finally in the third part I discuss what external and internal factors that in different ways could influence the media production and the journalists work. But first of all I will give a short introduction of the special concerns to my study.

De-westernizing media studies

There are innumerable academic texts regarding mass media, journalism, democracy, and citizen's right to information. But most of these texts are deeply Eurocentric produced in Western parts of the world and relating to Western media. According to the British researcher McCargo, Western understandings do not translate well to Asian contexts. He means western researchers often are too occupied with questions of state censorship and repression, failing to do justice to the complex Asian situations of media ownership and control (McCargo 2003:153ff). Although Sri Lanka is a former colony with many western influences, the media situation and the socio-cultural aspects are very different from the western.

The researchers Nguyet Erni and Keng (born in Asia but working in United States) mean Asia could no longer be a place for case studies where western methods and theories are applied (Nguyet Erni and Keng Chua 2005:3ff). Others like the Chinese researcher Eric Kit-wai Ma who has written about rethinking media studies in China, doubts Asia needs completely new media theories. He writes: "*Justifying the claims for new Asian media theories by essentializing and exoticizing the Asian experience in fact puts forward an unjustifiable claim that Asia is unique and isolated from the development of transnational capitalism*" (Curran and Myung-Jin Park 2000:32).

Although the researchers Curran and Myung-Jin Park (British researcher respectively Korean researcher) are of the opinion that some values like freedom, equality and solidarity should be seen as universal, they point out that the understanding of the world's media systems are influenced by a few and not representative countries and conclude; "*This distorts understanding not only of non-Western countries but also of a large part of the West as well*" (Curran and Myung-Jin Park 2000:15).

In conclusion there are different perceptions whether research with Western perspectives is at all legitimized when applied in an Asian context. This is something I have tried to be aware of throughout this study. Still, it would be impossible for me to do this study not using mainly western theories and methods. Even if I have tried my best to find perspectives related to the specific features of the media situation in the Asian countries, especially for Sri Lanka. Though most of the texts I found have been of a more historical character concerning media history or focused on the media content. Many of them also are based on the Western concepts of for instance democracy. Still, what has become obvious to me is how little attention, if even any, we have paid during our education to raise and discuss these essential questions.

Between a normative and operational approach

The Dutch mass media researcher Denis McQuail means you could talk about four different types of theories when studying mass media and mass communication; *Social scientific theory* that searches for general explanations on the nature of mass media, their way to work and effects based on systematic and objective observations. *Normative theory* tries to describe and investigate how the media ought to work with the aim to achieve the ideals. According to McQuail this type of theory is important since it is of great importance for the creation and legitimizing of media institutions, as well as for expectations held by different institutions, organizations and the public. The normative theories can often be seen in laws, regulations and ethical guidelines, but also in the public debate. *Operational theory* focuses on knowledge and ideas reproduced in the practical work. This type of knowledge exists within all organizations, and inside the media organisation it can be seen as what is considered newsworthy, thoughts about how to satisfy the needs and interests of the audience or how to stick to the guidelines. *Everyday or common-sense theory* concerning media use and knowledge derived from own experiences of the media, like interpretation of different media genres, how to separate fiction from reality or see through propaganda (McQuail 2000:7f).

In my study of the print media in Sri Lanka I stand somewhere between a normative and an operational approach. I look upon what is said about how the media ought to work, how the journalists' themselves think about what role the media should have as well as the actual obstacles they face to live up to their aims. This is according to the Swedish researchers Nord and Strömbäck also an essential standing point since the challenge is to bridge the gap of what media ought to do and is actually doing (Nord and Strömbäck 2004:37).

Media, society and a journalistic mission

A classical attempt to explain the relationship between mass media and the society is the work of *Four theories of the press* written by the Sieberg, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. I will discuss these theories shortly and then move on to a new work; *Comparing Media Systems – Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004), in which the American and Italian researchers Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini with the base in the work of Sieberg et al attempt to present a new way of looking upon the relationship between media and society. Even though the work of Hallin and Mancini are still Eurocentric, I believe their thoughts could also be useful in understanding the Sri Lankan media system and how it differs from the Western.

Four theories becoming three

To understand the press in Sri Lanka it is essential to understand the political system. Hallin and Mancini think it is time to give up the four theories that for decades have dominated the way of looking at the worlds media systems, which they believe all reflect one perspective – the classical liberalism where the West is seen as the ideal (Hallin and Mancini 2004:3ff).

One thing the two books however have in common is that they assume a media system cannot be understood without taking the political system into consideration, for instance the relationship between economic and political interest, the development of the civic society, the governmental system and so forth. The difference is while Sieberg et al always view the media systems as a reflection of the society, Hallin and Mancini believe the relationship is reciprocal (Hallin and Mancini 2004:8f).

Still with focus on the West, Hallin and Mancini present a comparative study between different media systems in North America and Europe (Hallin and Mancini 2004:2). Some countries fit better in the models than others and they point out the theories should be seen as ideal types rather than fixed entities. Their aim is to raise understanding about how different systems have developed and changed (Hallin and Mancini 2004:10f). The models are empirical rather than normative, although Hallin and Mancini do not see themselves as uninterested in normative aspects since they think media institutions ought to work for the common good (Hallin and Mancini 2004:14).

Hallin and Mancini structure media systems of North-America and Europe in three models; the Mediterranean or Polarized Model, the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model and the North Atlantic or Liberal Model. I will examine the first one a bit more since I believe the Polarized Model is the most interesting in relation to the media situation in Sri Lanka. In that way I use the theories both as a starting point in understanding what may differ between for instance Sweden and Sri Lanka, but I will also come back to these theories in my analysis, which means I also use it some what empirically. The three models could shortly be described as;

The Mediterranean or Polarized Model is characterized by a small newspaper circulation and an elite press. The model applies to countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy where press freedom and commercialization came relatively late. The relationship between the political system and the media system tends to be strong (which they call political parallelism) and media is often state owned, regulated or funded by the state and the political pressure from different external interests is strong. Hence the print media is marked by a strong focus on political life and the journalism is more commentary-oriented than in other parts of Europe. Professionalization and journalists' autonomy is weak, although the power within the news organization has been more openly contested than in the other models. The authors consider these countries on their way to the development of liberalism, with a strong role of the state (Hallin and Mancini 2004:73f).

Polarized political systems are usually complex political systems and there is a culture of so called political clientilism (Hallin and Mancini 2004:132). Political clientilism can be described as "...a pattern or social organization in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various forms of support." (Hallin and Mancini 2004:58). This means personal connections with political parties or other high authorities may be more important than formal rules and commitments to some particular interest stronger than to the "common good". Political loyalty has more influence in decision-making than professional criteria and is often necessary for a successful business. In a newspaper this could mean that journalists are more dependent on personal political contacts to get access to information. The journalist can also exert pressure in his or her own interest by threaten with expose certain things. Hence, the interest of the elites is more important than providing useful information for the public and the culture for professionalization is low. The gap between ideal and reality is also shown to be bigger in countries, like for instance Spain or Italy, where journalists express loyalty to liberal ideals as neutrality or objectivity, while the practice is "...deeply rooted in partisan advocacy traditions" (Hallin and Mancini 2004:14). Understanding the meaning and consequences of political clientilism is essential in order to understand the media systems within these countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004:58f).

The North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model applies to countries with a high circulation and an early development of press freedom. This is the system of countries like Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland. Many of these countries are characterized by a mixture; a history of a strong party press next to a commercial one, a commentary-oriented journalism next to growing emphasis on neutrality, high professionalism next to high political parallelism and high freedom of information and press freedom next to state intervention (although a limitation of the state intervention has been seen as necessary to guarantee a free flow of information). Within this model media is regarded as an important actor in society and should therefore take social responsibility, which partly is secured by state support and regulations. These countries also have developed social groups that traditionally have been integrated in the political process (Hallin and Mancini 2004:74f). I believe this theory is close to the social responsibility theory of Sieberg et al, which assumes media has certain obligations to society and that media ownership is a public trust. Therefore the content should be true, accurate, fair, objective and relevant. It also stresses that the media should be free and self-regulated (with exceptions when the government may intervene to protect public interest), follow agreed code of ethics as well as holding professional standards (McQuail 2000:150).

The North Atlantic or Liberal Model characterizes countries as United States, Canada, Ireland and United Kingdom. These are also countries with an early development of press freedom and with a high circulation of the press, although the circulation is lower than in the countries of the Democratic Corporatist Model. Within these countries political parallelism is low (with the exception of United Kingdom), the commercial newspapers dominate and professionalism is quite high (although they lack formal organization as in countries of North/Central Europe). Journalists autonomy is (also with the exception of United Kingdom) more likely to be regulated by commercial than political interests. Journalism is in general information-oriented (again with the exception of Britain that is said to be a bit more commentary-oriented) and the role of the state is limited. These countries do not have strong organized social groups like the countries in the Democratic Corporatist Model (Hallin and Mancini 2004:75).

The models can naturally not directly be applied to an Asian context. Hallin and Mancini though hope they can be used as a reference point when looking at other media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004:306). I believe they can be useful in my study. As mentioned the Polarized Pluralist Model is probably the most useful trying to understand the media situation in Sri Lanka since the press has shown to be politicized and biased, with relative weak common professional norms. The authors also point out that media systems of the Western Europe and North America have tended to dominate the global development (Hallin and Mancini 2004:6). This is something widely discussed and what some (but not all) would call cultural imperialism. I do not have this perspective on my essay, but I am aware of that there are certainly different opinions about the use of Western perspectives.

The print media as a political actor

The first Western media theories focused on media as a political actor and in England in the late 18th century Edmund Burke coined the expression “Fourth Estate”. By being fourth estate the press was an actor next to the Lords, Church and Commons (McQuail 2000:147). Still traditionally the print media has been considered an observer of the political scene, but incidents the latest decades have proved how badly this idea corresponds to reality. Today press is often considered a premier and important actor within the political field, which makes discussions about media’s role and responsibility even more important (Lichtenberg 1990:1).

The British researcher Duncan McCargo has written about print media and politics in Pacific Asia. He criticises media researchers for not understanding the importance of politics, as well as political science for failing to recognize media as an important political agent. McCargo argues that media within an Asian context should be viewed as political actors and institutions in their own right. As such they can play three different roles in a democratic process, as agent of; stability, restraint or change. As an agent of stability media helps preserve the political and social order, as an agent of restraints media contribute to a progress by criticising policies of the ruling government and exposing corruption, and as a agent of change media helps to shape political changes in times of crisis (McCargo 2003:1ff). Print media, and even a single publication, can hold different types of agencies simultaneously and during different times and situations. One example is Indonesia, where the press under the control of president Suharto, went from serving as an agent of stability to function as in agent of restraint and thereby contributed to destabilize the New Order Suharto was implementing (McCargo 2003:98). This I believe raise questions about who should set the agenda and for whom media is primarily working.

The press in Sri Lanka has many times shown to be all but an observer. The Sri Lankan media researcher Dr Ariyaratne Athugala, means the press is reinforcing the existing political and ethnic conflict. The press is often pessimistic and has used disinformation and playing on stereotypes and emotions of different communities to stimulate the conflict. He accuses the media for not taking its responsibility to combat corruption and stopping violation against human rights. He refers to studies of the media, in which he says that state-centric bias has lead to an ignorance of questions concerning development, gender equality and human rights. Although he point out Tamil newspapers as slightly better (Athugala 2005:78ff).

A mission to strengthen democracy

According to the Swedish researcher Kent Asp you face two problems when discussing a journalistic mission. Firstly, is there anything that can at all be called a journalistic mission and secondly, who has given the journalism this mission? (Asp 1992:9) I and many with me are of the opinion that media have a democratic mission, given to them primarily by the public. But what that mission exactly include depend on how you define democracy.

A basic definition, which I agree with, is that everyone is and should be treated as equals, having the same possibility and rights to self-determination and to decide what is best for them (Strömbäck 2000:26). It is a rather wide definition, but includes the right of the individual to seek and get information, freedom of holding his or her opinion as well as the right to express it. And since I am dealing with normative questions I agree with McQuail when he writes about how democracy demands reliable information that concerns people. It also demands a press were different voices are heard, as well as a media that facilitate participation for citizens in political and social matters (McQuail 2000:145).

Viewed from a normative perspective an ideal role of media could be said to deepen and strengthen democracy by fulfilling four different functions. First to serve people with sufficient *information* which makes them take informed discussions, and vice versa which inform politicians about problems of the society. Secondly to *comment* what is going on in the society. Thirdly media to act as a so called *watch-dog*, controlling and scrutinizing people with power and fourthly media should encourage *communication between groups* within political, technical and non-profit organisations (Asp 1992:9, Nord and Strömbäck 2004:19). These four functions though relate to a Swedish context and are not by all seen as equal important.

Different functions are more or less prominent in different contexts depending on how you interpret democracy. Researchers Nord and Strömbäck talk about three different democracy models (freely translated from Swedish); competition model, participatory model and conversation model (Nord and Strömbäck 2004:21ff). The models are not interesting as definitions in themselves, but rather because they demand different things of the journalist. Therefore I believe they are important to mention since they show the difference of how identify democracy will reveal how you look upon the public and the media's mission.

Competition model primarily focuses on the Election Day when the citizens choose between different elites. The politicians are acting and the citizens reacting. The role of media is to investigate how well the politicians have fulfilled their promises and to serve the citizens with information. It is the task of the media or the politicians to set the agenda.

Participatory model views the citizens as active actors in society, the more people that commit themselves the better. It is a win-win situation, the individual gets more knowledge and self development, the society gets a better foundation for decisions and implementation. The most important role for media is to act as a public forum for discussion between the public and the political elite and to let ordinary citizens come forward in the debate. The agenda should be set by the citizens.

Conversation model is similar to participatory model and sees the citizen as an active actor. This model though points out that the debates must be characterized by equality, intellectual openness and rational arguments. It is the obligation of the media to make sure this is realized and they should encourage ordinary people to participate.

An open discussion in society which allows different opinions and views out in the public could therefore be seen as essential to democracy. A well known conception of this discussion is the concept "public sphere" once introduced by Jürgen Habermas. I will though not examine the work of Habermas but rather critical perspectives raised by other researchers of the concept.

The idea of a public sphere

Jürgen Habermas used the concept public sphere to define a public arena where information can be exchanged and widely discussed. Media has by many been viewed as a modern form of such a sphere. Habermas thoughts have been rewritten and criticized, including by Habermas himself. Critics mean the idea of a public sphere demands great interactivity, and even though new media like Internet is interactive, it is still not equal. Ever since the discussions on the market-places of the antic Athens, the public sphere has excluded groups of the society (Burton 2005:95).

I think the English sociologist Thompson makes an interesting contribution to the debate of the existence of a public sphere. He reread Habermas discussions and concludes Habermas was not interested in the media in itself, but rather in what way media stimulated the talks face-to-face of the bourgeois class at the British coffeehouses. Whereas Thompson mean media has changed the whole picture. Media today has instead created a new "publicness", which allows the public to learn about issues and actions without being there or interacting with someone else (Thompson 1995:127ff). Consequently media can make things visible that earlier was not spotlighted, where every-day events may become catalysts for actions far away from the place for the actual event (Thompson 1995:245ff). Furthermore media has

displaced the traditional model and created something new. Therefore it is more constructive to think about what “publicness” mean today with new ways of interacting not limited in time or space (Thompson 1995:69ff, 127ff). Thompson thinks media instead should make people autonomous, responsible and capable of making their own judgments, rather than stick to a false belief of them becoming partners in a dialogue (Thompson 1995:258).

Whether a public sphere actually exists or stays as an intellectual concept could be discussed, so even in the case of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan media researcher Dr. Athugala means there is a huge gap between those that have access to the media and those that have not; “*The divide exists between those in cities and those in rural areas and also between the educated and the uneducated, between economic classes, nationalities and between the more privileged and less privileged in Sri Lanka.*” (Athugala 2005:78).

To sum up, there is no universal explanation of media’s function in a transition to a more democratic society. How media contributes to a democratic transition depends on the role and form media holds in that given society, which is influenced by cultural, socioeconomic and political factors. (O’Neil 1998:7, Gunther and Mughan 2000:26)

Worries for a democratic decline

An own reflection when reading literature on media and democracy is that there seem to be many people worried about the direction of the media development and how it could affect democracy, both in rich and poor countries. Though in the rich part of the world as Central and North Europe and for all North America, there is a lot written about the transformation of citizens to consumers.

In the West discussions are about what happens with democracy when entertainment increases at the expense of information and the public sphere gets privatized and commercialised (Burton 2005:97, Gunther and Mughan 2000:7). Some are afraid of democracy becoming too “populistic”, in which journalists become experts, focusing less on important questions, trivialize and focus on creating heroes and scapegoats. Worst scenario is people choosing entertainment above information (Burton 2003:36ff, Hvitfelt and Nygren 2005:29ff). I am though a bit critical to the consumption about the public. Is it bad if media with a more popular presentation attracts more listeners or viewers? I do not necessarily think it his necessarily bad to be “populistic” in the presentation. If an easier and more dramatised way of presenting things can create an interest by earlier uninterested readers, listeners and viewers, is that not for the better? Should it not be something there for everyone? In other words they may not have to exclude each other?

Competition for the limited time of the public and concentration of ownership shapes new pre-requisites and conditions. Optimists see new media as a possibility for more efficient transmission of information, which they mean will result in a better educated public. In opposite, pessimists see an increasing gap between those who have and those who have not, resulting in the creation of a “democracy of the elites” (Hvitfelt and Nygren 2005:27).

In different parts of the world people are concerned with the public’s low confidence in media. One reason is media do not seem to understand people and their needs, another is media is thought to represent different political and socio-economic groups which makes them not report both sides of an incident (Burton 2003:33, Gunther and Mughan 2000:26).

Differences between East and West, USA, Europe and South Asia, rather seems to be the reason why people are worried and how they express it.

In the public interest – many vague definitions

It is often said media should work in the public interest, but to find a clear definition on what this concept means is not an easy task. Public interest is a widely discussed conception in political and social science theory; it is a concept with positive connotations and includes expectations both on the role of media and their performance. A basic assumption is that media should be ruled by the same norms, values, rights and obligations that rules the rest of the society, or at least not cause social problems (McQuail 2000:142).

McQuail defines public interest as a media that “... carry out a number of important, even essential, tasks in a contemporary society and it is in the general interest that these are performed and performed well.” (McQuail 2000:142) He sets up a list of conditions for a media working in the public interest which includes factors as plurality of ownership, freedom of publication, wide circulation and access. Further more the cover should include a diversity of information and expressions. Finally, the media should respect the juridical system, as well as individual and general human rights (McQuail 2000:144). According to McQuail there are two opposing definition of the concept public interest; the “majoritarian” definition and the “unitarian” (or “absolutist”). The “majoritarian” mean public interest is the same thing as giving people what they want. The so called “unitarian” or “absolutist” version is that public interest is defined according to the dominant ideology (McQuail 2000:143).

McCargo though questions the concept of public interest in an Asian context. He thinks you first must ask “Who owns the dog?”. In countries where informal control and partisan support for different power-holders are part of the media practise, you could seriously question to which extent media could actually be seen as guardians for the public interest. He thinks media could either be seen as a watch-dog, a mirror or as a neutral agenda-setter, since some economic, political and social parts of the society are reflected more than others (McCargo 2003:14). I believe this may be true, but a very pessimistic approach.

Aware of these general definitions I search for something more concrete, like a policy document applying to the media in Sri Lanka, to see how public interest is interpreted.

Policy papers on public interest in Sri Lanka

There are two main policy documents which concern among other things public interest in Sri Lankan media;

- Code of Ethics ([http://www.fo.hik.se/Pdf/Code%20 of%20Ethics-%20English.pdf](http://www.fo.hik.se/Pdf/Code%20of%20Ethics-%20English.pdf))
- Media Charter. (http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/Media_Charter_English.pdf)

In 1998 media organisations and institutions met for a conference in Colombo. Participants among others were The Newspaper society of Sri Lanka, Free Media Movement and the Editors’ Guild of Sri Lanka, in association with Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, the World Association for Newspaper, the International Press Institute, Article 19* and the Media Institute of Southern Africa and the Commonwealth press union. (Annual report 2005, Press Complaints Commission Sri Lanka 2005:6) This resulted in *The Colombo Declaration*

* ARTICLE 19 is an international organisation which defends and promotes freedom of expression and freedom of information. See: <www.article19.org>

on Media Freedom and Social Responsibility, which stresses legislative reforms, ethic principles and professional standards. This was the starting point for the set up of a Press Complaints Commission and the formulation of a Code of Ethics.

Code of Ethics is accepted by the newspapers in Sri Lanka and the aim is to ensure a free and responsible press sensitive to the readers. It further states print media should uphold a tradition of investigative journalism in the public interest, take social responsibility, and hold the highest international standard highlighting factors as accuracy, protecting sources and respecting privacy. According to the code exceptions can only be made if it is in the public interest.

In the Code of Ethics public interest is defined as;

- Protecting democracy, good governance, freedom of expression and the fundamental rights of the people and of keeping them informed about events that would have a direct or indirect bearing on them, and that of their elected government, and detecting or exposing crime, corruption, maladministration or a serious misdemeanour;
- Protecting public health and security and social, cultural and educational standards;
- Protecting the public from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation.

A master thesis conducted by Barbro Jansson in 2005 within the main stream press of Sri Lanka revealed the code is pretty well-known within the journalistic working force, although only six out of ten say that the code is used in there newspapers and eight out of ten believe it is important to follow it (Jansson 2005:56f).

Media Charter is a result of a conference which was hold in Sri Lanka the autumn 2005. It was facilitated by the Media Unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives and the International Federation of Journalists. Participants were the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions, Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance, Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, Free Media Movement and several provincial journalist organizations.

This resulted in the “Media charter for a democratic and pluralist media culture and social and professional rights for media and pluralism in Sri Lanka”, which could also be seen as a policy document for the mainstream press in Sri Lanka. In the introduction of the charter you find the following;

“A professional media with a responsibility to the public interest, independent of government or partisan influence and interference, is a vital part of the series of checks and balances central to democracy./.../There needs to develop a strong and democratic public service culture within the news media so that it reflects the richness of society, serves the whole community independent of commercial, partisan or government interests and provides a plurality of voices from across the spectrum of society in Sri Lanka.” (Media Charter for a democratic and pluralist media culture and social and professional rights for media and pluralism in Sri Lanka, September 2005:3)

The charter identifies five fundamental principals for media practise, and I believe the first one is central in my study; *“Respect for truth and the public's right to know are primary obligations of journalists”*. (Ibid:4) Moreover it concerns editorial independency and states;

“The treatment of news and information as a commodity or for political ends or in support of cultural or religious objectives must not override or interfere with the duty of journalists and media to inform the public.” (Ibid:5)

To sum up, my definition of the public interest will be based on what stands in the Code of Ethics and Media Charter; a media working in the public interest should focus on the citizen’s right to know, take social responsibility and work for the best of the common good. Hence, it could not primarily be about selling free copies but to contribute to a positive development of the whole society. Even if in the best of the worlds a story is both interesting and important.

Still media is often not established primarily to serve public interest but to fulfil their own goals whether they are political, economical or cultural. Burton highlights that media is often said to have the intention to represent the interest of the public, but rarely let the public speak. When the public speak it is also on terms set up by the producers or editors. Burton writes: *“Access to the media, to a public sphere which all might at least switch on to, is not free, is not guaranteed and in fact only takes place according to ground rules defined by the media themselves”* (Burton 2005:96). When the main goal of the media is economic profit, the public interest is often defined as what the public finds interesting (McQuail 2000:142). This, I argue, stands in close relation to a strong belief in the free market where the public is viewed as consumers.

With this in mind I will move on to the second main part of this chapter to discuss theories about what the public needs and wants.

Interesting or important

Ultimately journalism is depending on the fact there is an audience, someone who want to read the newspaper. This is not the same as always giving people what they want without thinking about the consequences.

Interesting or important is said to reflect different perspectives. While giving people what they want applies to a market-driven approach, what the public should or not should take part of is rather ideological. Interest is about choosing stories “everybody talks about”, stories that will create the biggest audience for the advertisers, while important stories could be about giving voice to the voiceless (Dewerth-Pallemayser 1997:61ff).

In the previous part I have focused more on the ideological aspect, what the press ought to do to carry out their democratic mission. Though in this part I will look closer to how a journalistic approach which stresses journalistic professional values (which could be said working in the public interest according to the policy documents) relates to a market-driven approach which aims to maximise profit. To maximise profit and to maximize peoples understanding does not necessarily have to be two contradictory things, although that is often the case.

Some may think my presentation below is somewhat black or white. I am aware of the blurred line between what might be interesting and important. Still, I chose to present it as opposite concepts to make my statement more clear.

Market-driven journalism

The American researcher McManus points out most of the news around the world today are produced by profit-seeking enterprises, an aspect not included in the models of news production (McManus 1994:21). He writes about journalism from an economic perspective and with examples from an American context. In the market-driven journalism the audience are no longer citizens, but consumers. News becomes a commodity bought and sold and has to suit the needs of the market rather than reflect reality. It is an exchange; consumers exchange their attention for some money to get news, whereupon the media company sells their attention to the advertisers (Ibid:1,37,61).

In the model of McManus commercial media participate and compete on four different markets; audience, stock market, advertisement and sources. The media company therefore favours width in front of depth, since it would be ineffective to produce a content that attracts a smaller but maybe more interested audience. Advertisers do not care about journalistic standards; they just care about reaching as many potential customers as possible (Ibid:6, 62).

In a market-driven journalism the consumer is the main actor who defines what is a piece of news and good quality, and since it is all about pleasing the audience, consumers become the gatekeepers (Ibid:4ff). In a micro-economic perspective it means that if everybody working in their own interest instead of the common good, the competition will lead to a win-win situation where the best quality to the best price favours the consumer. Though if the basic need of the market is not accomplished this will create conflict and inequality (Ibid:62).

Early Western liberal thinkers took it for granted that the enterprise would automatically lead to freedom of expression and an independent press, but the growing of big media corporations and the commercial concern have rather shown to be a threat to these values. Instead an unregulated market has shown to be leading to homogenization and limitation of diverse views (Thompson 1995:239). Since they all want a share of the market they rather copy each other, which result in indirection rather than multiplicity. The Norwegian media researcher Sigurd Allern also describes this race as journalists hunting news in a flock. He means circulation numbers become the only indication for what is important (Allern 1997:20). In his study of local television channels in the United States, McManus also saw competition leading to a focus on eliminating reasons for the consumers to choose another channel rather than thinking about what society needs (Ibid:70). As other consequences of competition and commercialisation within the media Allern talks about how this lead to a “Golden mean”, where you are so afraid of loosing your customers that you try to please everyone all the time. Allern furthermore points out this leads to more focus on trivialized news instead of politics, since it sells better (Allern 1997:25ff).

Some people believe a market-driven journalism creates an “idiot culture” where entertainment replace serious information, others think the serious journalism is too boring and welcome what they see as some “fresh air” (McManus 1994:2). McManus himself does not make a judgement whether market-driven journalism is good or bad, though Burton is more critical, he writes; *“Perhaps the most depressing consequence of profit-driven editorial cutbacks is their relative invisibility. Public officials might complain if they obtain less publicity as a result of such cutbacks, but audience cannot know that investigative reporting, being expensive, is often cut back first when budgets are decreased. Journalists may feel that their democratic mission to go below the radar is impaired, but they have no one to whom to complain except each other.”* (Burton 2003:27). Thompson is however of the opinion

commercial media do not necessarily have to lead to “...a dulling of criticism, a downgrading of quality and a hijacking of public discourse for commercial ends” (Thompson 1995:242).

According to the Sri Lankan researcher Athugala, market influence is obvious also in the Sri Lankan media, especially in the broadcasting media. For the time being most of the television programmes are for the upper economic groups, while there are no programs for minorities, homeless, single parents or underprivileged groups. The quality is compromised to save costs, and the programs to promote consumerism with the aim to maximise a wealthy audience and get more advertisers (Athugala 2005:79). Also the Sri Lankan researcher Disanayaka talks about media treating war as a commodity, helping to increase sales figures rather than increase understanding of the situation. In his research he shows the conflict largely has been reported as a series of incidents rather than covering the long-term implications of the conflict (Disanayaka 1999:268).

A journalistic versus a market-driven journalism

The two different approaches though have an important thing in common; the size of the audience is important. They may though look for different audiences; in a journalistic approach* those who need the information but are not potential customers, and in a market-driven approach those who have little interest but are important customers (McManus 1994:86).

McManus also means the two approaches have different consequences for news production. The probability of an event becoming news according to a market theory if the information is not harming investors or sponsors, is cheap to cover and report and is expected to be attractive to wealthy readers the advertisers will pay for. While the probability of an event becoming news according to a journalistic theory is proportional to the expected consequence of the story and the size of the audience for whom the story might be important (Ibid:87).

Still some events like catastrophes, big accidents like a flight crash or a sex scandal will become news both within a journalistic and market approach since this news will both interest and inform readers. At those occasions readers who normally are mainly looking for entertainment want relevant information. McManus means it is ironic; “*Market-driven news departments are at their best when times are the worst*” (Ibid:86f). Hence, Sri Lanka has and has had a lot of stories like this during the years, with a bloody history and one year the country was hit by the tsunami in 2004. During my visit in Sri Lanka, examples of incidents that were closely followed by all media were the peace talks and the bomb blast in Colombo, which followed by more violence in areas around Trincomalee, curfew in Jaffna and closing of the road A9 between Jaffna and Colombo.

I do not myself have a strong belief in purely market-driven journalism. I do not see a totally free market creating best quality since I think it lead to sensationalism. It also assumes people always make rational choices. To make a rational choice I think you have to be able to see quality differences between the newspapers and if none of them live up to professional standards, how would it be possible to be a win-win situation for the society and the individual. And as McManus says; on definition news is what the people do not yet know, (McManus 1994:64) so how could I as a reader possible be sure it is correct, true and fair?

* McManus calls these two perspectives theory but I think it is rather a question of perspective than theories.

Why the ideal may not be the reality

Earlier theoretical parts show demands on the journalism and the individual journalists in Sri Lanka are high. In this third part I will look closer to what may influence the journalistic work, focusing on central questions of the relationship between the individual and the structure. The question of the individual versus the structure could be seen as one of the main questions within social science. Though earlier research has shown it is difficult to say the structure is more powerful than individual factor as the attitudes and perceptions of the individual journalist or vice versa.

The individual and the structure

The media and the everyday work of the journalists and news editors are not only following abstract ideals but influenced by external factors, like cultural values, sources, legislations, economic and technical condition, as well as internal factors as hierarchy inside the organisation, power, competence, news values and so on (Nord and Strömbäck 2004:21ff).

Autonomy of the journalist within the newspaper can also vary between different countries and newspapers and an earlier quantitative study of the main stream press in Sri Lanka showed journalists mainly saw obstacles in the structure and organisation rather than individual. The biggest problems they faced were too little time, personnel and technical equipment. Interviews also revealed problems of mass media logic in itself (competition, deadlines), as well as threats, low status, low salaries, limitations within the state media, capriciousness by the bosses, lack of English knowledge and technical skills (Jansson 2005:52, 60ff). This was similar to the Chinese researcher Yuen Ying Chan who showed problems with press freedom and self-censorship in the main stream press in Hong Kong was not caused by the journalists themselves but the owners and structural weaknesses (McCargo 2003:113).

An own reflection is that it might also be much easier to see problems in the world around you, instead of critically examine your own attitudes and values.

Media logic and every-day routines

Media logic is a term used to describe how incidents are defined as news and get published depending on how well they fit into the form of the medium, its organisation, working conditions, norms and need of attention. That could be incidents that are easy to dramatise, simplify or personify. Or it is incidents that fit into the cultural values or stereotypes within the media organisation or the society. It is a way of surviving and producing news efficiently in a world with too much information. Wars, disasters and violence are example of incidents that often fit well into these criteria (Strömbäck 2000:158).

Routines reflect the culture of the organisation and the accepted way to produce news and make it more efficient (McManus 1994:85). Thus, news production could be viewed as a continuous circle which requires a production of the news product in the fastest, preferable cheapest and most efficient way. The newspaper must be delivered in the right time which is one of the reasons why predictably available raw materials, like press conferences and high-governmental officials easily get publicity. This makes the journalists even more dependent of their sources. Since it is also expensive to let reporters make research or find out new stories active reporting is more usual in newspapers with greater resources (Burton 2003:50ff).

A dilemma of journalism routines and a democratic ideal

Mass-production of news is the reality of the journalism and a big problem is that either theory or a democratic ideal involve routines and reality of the journalistic practice. Theories of journalism and democracy assume the journalists' role is to inform citizens. Citizens will then get informed as long as they frequently watch or read the news. Once informed they are more likely to participate politically. Consequently the more informed the more democratic society (Burton 2003:55ff).

It neither specifies what kind of information the citizen needs, nor what kind of news is essential for democracy. It assumes a newsworthy story according to the journalists will create an informed public. The theory also implies informed citizens automatically want to participate in the political discussion, and if people start to discuss this will affect the politics. If the chain is broken the journalism cannot contribute to democracy as the theory suggest. According to Burton the most serious assumption underlying the theory is that knowledge is believed to be power, even though in reality power creates knowledge, which means citizens firstly must obtain power to get the right information (Burton 2003:55ff).

There might not be a given connection, still I believe unbalanced, inaccurate and misleading reporting will not be in the public interest or good for the society, may it still be an ideal.

Though, journalists in Sri Lanka do not only face problems of media routines. The work force could not yet be said to be professionalized, although research indicate it is in progress (Jansson 2005). Also the working conditions can be very hard for many of the journalists, especially journalists covering the conflict. I found several reports from organisations as Reporters without Borders, Free Media Movement, INFORM and Committee to Protect Journalists and others, about journalists that been threatened, harassed or killed, still the press is considered as relatively active (Landguiden 2006:5).

To sum up, how journalists look upon the audience, the public and the impact of their work is central. Should the public passively be feed with information or be encouraged to civil participation? Are they supposed to learn something or be entertained? Are they seen as consumers or citizens? Who should set the agenda – the journalists, the public or the politicians? What responsibilities do the media have to the public? Do they have possibilities to accomplish it?

Finally, who should represent the weakest under these conditions? There is no representative for the people who could not even afford to buy the newspaper, there is no predictable news and they do not fit into the deadlines. Further more, poor readers do not attract advertisers.

Aim of this study

As has become clear in the background chapter and also mentioned in the theoretical framework, the press in Sri Lanka has many times proven to either work for the best of the society and rather adding fuel to the fire. They are also said to be politicized and biased in their reporting. Thus I got interest to investigate how the journalist themselves look upon this.

The aim of this study is to investigate the journalists' image of what role the press should have and could have in the Sri Lankan society.

My main questions are;

1. What is the journalists' view of their role and responsibility?

From a normative approach they are said to have a mission to contribute to democracy, working in the public interest and take social responsibility. Here I am interested to see what the journalists think this mission should be and how they interpret public interest and social responsibility.

2. What view do the journalists hold of what stories the public wants and needs?

This question focuses more on the content and what the journalists think at all should be in the newspaper. Who should decide – the journalists, the politicians or the ordinary people? What areas are seen as important and interesting for the public?

3. What obstacles do the journalists experience when working according to the ideal?

This question focuses on working conditions which are identified as problems in the journalists' every day work, which may be obstacles for reaching the ideal.

In my analysis I will discuss what the result could mean seen from a normative perspective about the role of media for democratization. I will from a comparative perspective between the newspapers, examine the thoughts, attitudes and definition the journalists have regarding their mission, how they define and interpret to work in the “public interest” and “social responsibility” rather than try to reveal how the work is actually done. I will see the results in relation to the policy documents that the press has agreed on, for instance on Code of Ethics, which say that press should be sensitive for needs and expectations from its public. However the most interesting discussion will concern eventual obstacles and possibilities to reconcile the differences between ideal and reality.

My hope is this will contribute to a wider understanding of what situations, thoughts and attitudes of the public interests and needs that exist among the journalists and reflect upon which impact this may have on the media content. If journalists see themselves as primarily agents for reproducing the attitudes and beliefs of their own ethnic group, as defender of the status quo (a conservative role), and not see social problems and inequalities in the society as newsworthy, it is not likely it will end up as an investigative and reflecting story in the newspaper.

Method and material

Before leaving for Sri Lanka I was fully aware of the fact that doing research in a foreign country can be difficult. With the two lead words flexibility and reflexivity I left for Colombo in the end of March. Still it is impossible to be fully prepared for problems you will face. As I later read the first notes in my travel diary, I realised that a lot of things have happened on the way that I impossibly could have predicted. Some of my first impressions have gone from chaotic inputs to making sense, others have not. If I would have done everything by the book regarding field research in another cultural context, I would rather need a couple of years. For this thesis I have totally eight weeks. Generally a lot of my choices have, due to the time available and lack of own contacts with the newspapers, shown to be efficient and practical in retrospective. In this chapter I will present the choices I made throughout my work and reflect upon what consequences these may have had on the validity of my results.

A qualitative approach

In a qualitative study the researcher wants to understand how the respondents themselves experience, interpret and evaluate their situation and their motives according to themselves for acting in certain ways (Dahlgren 1996:90). My focus is to understand the journalists' own view of their responsibilities and possibilities, not what they are actually doing. I am also not interested in generalizing the results, but to hear as many views of the situation as possible with the purpose to contribute to a wider understanding. Hence, I choose a qualitative approach for my study.

I have understood that the belief in qualitative methods may not be so strong in Sri Lanka, like in many other places. Almost all the research I have found about the media in Sri Lanka have been quantitative, and most of the times content analysis. There is of course a lot of critique against qualitative research, for instance that it is not scientific, reliable and that it is too dependent on the researcher. I am not going to discuss which method that is better than the other (Steinar Kvale offers a brief examination of the critique against a qualitative approach in his book *Den kvalitative forskningsintervjun*). It is a question of how you look upon the concept of science. I am of the opinion that there is no such thing as the "truth" or objective research within social science. Using yourself as the research "tool" is though problematic and especially when conducting research in a cultural and social context so different from your own.

The choice of method

The individual journalist's perspective is my focus and interview as method was for that reason the given choice. The aim with the qualitative interview is not to generalise, but to explore and identify qualities and features of a not known or less known phenomenon from the perspective of the interviewees (Starrin and Renck 1996:53).

Before I left Sweden I had thoughts of using a different qualitative method, which is called "Triangulation". Triangulation could be either within the method or between different methods and aims to raise the validity of the study. Even if there are researchers, who claim there is no guarantee that using different methods will result in fewer sources of errors (Svensson and Starring 1996:218). Moreover, I had the ambition to also do following observation. Later I realised that carry out the interviews took enough time since finding respondents, transport oneself between different newspapers as well as transcribing the

interviews were very time consuming. During three of my almost seven weeks it was also impossible to make arrangement. The first week I needed for planning and arranging, one week disappeared due to the Sinhala New Year and the third week all journalists were too busy due to a bomb blast in central Colombo. Hence, I decided to concentrate on the interviews. Still I believe that it would have helped my interpretation if I had spent at least a day or two in the editorial.

Press instead of Television

The choice of investigating journalists within press instead of Television could be discussed. Even though there are few if any research results which compare the effects on the public of Television respectively the print media, there is a conception that Television has bigger impact even though research results are contradictory (Lichtenberg 1990:6).

The reasons I choose newspapers instead of TV or radio are several. National radio runs mostly music and even if surveys have shown that television is the principle source for news, the newspaper readers show the highest interest in politics. The print media in Sri Lanka is also interesting, from another part of view, since there is an exceptional high literacy rate for being a developing country, but relatively low circulation (A Study of the media in Sri Lanka 2005). A contributing factor for this could be the price, but according to my contacts in the Sri Lanka Press Institute a more likely explanation is that people do not feel the content concerns them. Television is as medium more dependent on pictures, which also limit the possible content in some aspects. By choosing newspaper I could also read them everyday (though only the English ones), to get an idea what they said and how.

In opposite to the western world, where newspapers circulation is decreasing, the print press is considered as an important political actor in an Asian context (McCargo 2003:153).

Selection of newspapers

My aim was to get as wide spectra of papers as possible. Thus, I wanted to focus on national newspapers which are considered the most popular or influential within the three main languages; Sinhala, Tamil and English. I also wanted both state owned and private owned newspapers, since they most likely work under very different conditions. My selection is therefore what could be called a selection of variation. It means you search for a broad representation of different views within the phenomenon that you want to investigate. This selection is recommended if you, like I, want to examine for instance journalists with different ideological backgrounds (Larsson 2000:56f).

On the 28th of March, a couple of days after my arrival in Colombo, I had a short presentation in the office for people with valuable contacts and good knowledge about the newspaper market in Sri Lanka. With their help I selected six different newspapers. Three state owned; Daily News, Thinakaran and The Dinamina, and three private; Lankadeepa, Virakesari and The Sunday Leader. The latter is a weekly newspaper, well-known for its investigative way of reporting and not being afraid of criticising and publishing controversial stories.

The numbers of circulation and readership in the short presentation below are according to Lanka Market Research Bureau in Gunaratne and Wattedgama (2000:191). Facts about establishment, staff in editorial and correspondents are taken from Dharman's Media Guide of Sri Lanka (2005). Information from elsewhere is according to the reference.

A short presentation of the six newspapers

Sinhala, private: Lankadeepa

The newspaper was founded in 1991 and is owned by the private establishment Wijeya Newspaper Group. It has a circulation of 134 000 copies (readership 670 000) and is thereby the newspaper with the highest circulation in Sri Lanka. It is also the only newspaper available in some rural areas. The newspaper is famous for publishing crimes, especially related to sex (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:192ff).

Website: <http://www.lankadeepa.lk>

Sinhala, state: The Dinamina

Dinamina started in 1909 and is a government paper owned by the Lake House Group. The newspaper has a circulation of 55 000 copies (readership 275 000). About 100 full-time journalists are working in the editorial and the newspaper have over 600 local correspondents.

Website: -

Tamil, private: Virakesari

Virakesari is owned by the private establishment The Express Group, and started in 1930. It is thereby the oldest Tamil newspaper and with 30 000 copies it has also the highest circulation of 30 000 copies (150 000 readers). The newspaper has about 56 full-time journalists and around 100 local correspondents.

Website: <http://www.virakesari.lk/VIRA/default.php>

Tamil, state: Thinakaran

Thinakaran is a government newspaper owned by the Lake House Group. It started a couple of years after Virakesari, in 1932. It has a circulation of 29 000 copies (145 000 readers) and the newspaper has about 38 fulltime journalists and 115 correspondents. It is thought to be the most popular among the Muslims in the Eastern Province (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:185, 195).

Website: -

English, private: Sunday Leader

Sunday Leader started in 1994 and is said to be one of the most popular weekly newspapers (Peiris 1997:96). It became famous for its investigative attacks on the earlier government and also set a trend among Sunday newspapers to run popularized political gossip columns (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:195). The newspaper is owned by the private establishment Leader Publications, and has 15 fulltime journalists. (I did not find any numbers of their circulation)

Website: <http://www.thesundayleader.lk>

English, state: Daily News

Daily News was founded in 1918 and was the first newspaper started by the Lake House Group, which was taken over by the state in 1973. It is said to be the most preferred English daily (Gunaratne and Wategama 2000:192). The newspaper has 62 fulltime working journalists and 625 local correspondents. The circulation is about 75 000 copies (readership 375 000).

Website: <http://www.dailynews.lk/>

Selection of interviewees

Earlier research within the print press in Sri Lanka (Jansson 2005) indicated that there was a difference in perceptions between news editors and reporter, while personnel working in the sub desk did not identify themselves primarily as journalist. I wanted to meet journalists with different perceptions who are daily taking decisions about what to cover, from what angle and how to present it. Hence I choose to spread my interview between news editors and reporters. I excluded the chief editors who mostly are not involved fully in the daily routines. This made a total number of 18 interviews. Preferably you should stop interviewing when you feel that the interviews are not bringing any new information. Though in reality and when having a short time available, I had to set a limit. Still I believe I somewhat reached this level.

Since I believe that reporters are the first step in the process I selected reporters and one news editor or at some newspapers the deputy editor or associate news editor. I also tried to get experienced journalists and newcomers, with and without journalistic education, men and women, as well as within different areas in retrospective. I can conclude that I succeeded quite well in my effort. My respondents are of different ages, different background and with different training. Ten of them are males and eight of them females. They also cover different areas like politics, environment, crime, defence, business and health.

My selection was limited by the fact that I did not want to be dependent on an interpreter. In the English and Tamil papers this was usually not a problem, but in both the Sinhala papers very few journalists spoke English and I had to choose the ones who did. Luckily it still resulted in a spread of perspectives.

Access to the newspapers

To get access to the newspapers the Director General of Sri Lanka Press Institute wrote a letter to the chief editors of the private newspapers and the director, who is in charge for all the newspapers within the Lake House Group. In the letter he introduced me, asked for their assistance and pointed out that their cooperation would not only help me to get a broader knowledge but that my research would also be beneficial to the media industry in Sri Lanka. To the letter I attached a short presentation of myself and my project. (See appendix nr 2 and 3) The letters were sent by fax to the editorials during the first week of my stay in Colombo.

When the letter was sent out the plan was to call the editors, but things worked out in different ways. Twice contacts in the Sri Lanka Press Institute helped me to call a deputy editor and an editor of one of the papers, started the conversation and then handed the phone over to me. At one occasion the news editor was visiting the institute and I then made an appointment. Concerning the state owned newspapers I first met the director and he called the news editors of the three papers of the Lake House and asked them to “pass on some information” to me. I then made appointments with them for the following week.

I have thought a lot about the way of setting up the appointments. There was of course a risk that I would be seen as a representative of the Sri Lanka Press Institute, which according to some editors and journalists represent certain interests and everyone is not positive to the institute. Aware of this, I always pointed out that I was independent and that SLPI just acted as my host. I also explained that I was not paid by the institute and only in one or two of the interviews I mentioned I was there on a scholarship from SIDA, since that also could have lead to more “correct” answers. If I would have done the same research in Sweden I would have picked up the phone and called some journalists directly. That I could not do in Sri

Lanka. In comparison with Sweden it is even more important to have the right contacts to get access. I believe that it would have been very hard, maybe even impossible, for me to get into the editorials without the help of SLPI, especially in the government owned newspapers.

Making appointments with reporters

I was prepared for the fact that I would not always be able to choose reporters myself. I early understood there is a hierarchy within most of the newspapers and you obey seniors. You should choose respondents who are interested and willing to participate, though I do not believe that most of the reporters or even the news editors had the possibility to say no since they were commended by people higher up. Although in almost all of the cases I got the feeling that they enjoyed sharing their thoughts and experiences. In three cases I felt that the persons maybe did not wanted to participate. I believe it could have been because they did not speak English very well.

I interviewed three persons from every newspaper, one news editor and two reporters. In some cases the chief editor chose two journalists for me to interview. Other times I started with interviewing the news editor or deputy editor and from there, once I was in the editorial, made appointments to interview reporters. Since I needed the journalists for one to one and a half hours, which is a long time considering their busy schedule, I had to somewhat accept the selection of reporters done by the editor, news editor or deputy editor.

Semi structured in-depth interviews

Even though some researchers stress that “in-depth interview” is what the psychologists are doing, I use the phrase in-depth interviews since it is the mostly used in the literature I refer to. In-depth interviews could be more or less structured, depending on the amount of control you exercise on the respondents’ answers. I did what is usually called semi structured interviews, which is open ended but cover certain main topics and written down in an interview guide. According to Russell Bernard, who writes about qualitative method from an anthropologic perspective, semi structured interviews are recommended when you do not get more than one chance to do the interview or when you are dealing with high-level people of a community who are in need to use their time efficiently (Bernard 2002:203ff). Since I do not have the possibility to go back to Sri Lanka, and I interviewed journalists with limited time available, I believe that was the best choice.

The interview guide

I followed the advice to structure the interview guide from themes that steam from the purpose and main questions of my thesis. It demands that you during the interview cover these themes, but how you do it is less important as long as the questions are not leading the respondent to certain answers (Starring and Renck 1996:62).

I used the themes; media production and daily routines (to discover possibilities and obstacles within the media logic), public interest (which also included questions of selection and presentations, their thoughts of a good story and what the public want and need), social responsibility (their definition and in what way they saw their newspaper taking responsibility), media power (whether they believed they had power to influence people’s attitudes and behaviour) and obstacles (which included their biggest personal problems as well as their view of the problems within the press in Sri Lanka). Every theme included more specific questions that I used as back-up if the conversation would not naturally continue on

its own. My interview guide may seem wide, but as mentioned earlier I found it necessary to start with a very open approach since I did not know what might be problematic or interesting.

After a short introduction to my project I started the interview with the “grand-tour question” by asking my respondents to describe their routines of a normal working day. This was a question the journalists for sure could answer and probably would not find threatening. Every theme started with a more general open question like “what role do you think the press should play in the society”, and thereafter I followed up with questions where I asked them to exemplify and specify their answers.

The ideal according to all the method books is to do a test interview before going out in the field. I did not have the opportunity to do this, but I discussed my questions with people in SLPI and after that changed some formulations. For example; instead of asking “What do you think is a good news?” I asked “What do you think is a good story?” and in this way try to avoid just getting the common definition of news value. After the first interview I also excluded some questions, for instance which media they believed is the most important since I realized the answers became too speculative and not relevant for my thesis.

Accomplishing the interviews

Finding a quiet spot

The method books all say the same; make sure the interviewees reserve enough with time and that the interview could be held at a place where the person can speak undisturbed (Larsson 2000:60). I soon realised it was impossible. It was rather a question of finding the least busy and noisy spot with as few other people in the room as possible. Generally I did not experience that other people in the room disturbed neither the respondent, nor me. It was only in my first interview where a man also sitting in the room interfered in the conversation because he wanted to “help” my respondent and I had to ask him to leave us alone. I think that people were have been more used to having other people close and since they still could be critical, I took it as a sign for that they did not care about the co-workers. Anyway I can not exclude that answers could have been different if the interviews had been held in private.

The interviews were held in either a room attached to the editorial, the library, the computer room or in a sofa at the entrance. Generally I felt sitting in a sofa made the interview more relaxed. Only at one interview I felt that the spot might have influenced the answers. This was in an interview with a reporter at Lake House, were we were sitting in the sofa at the entrance, but he was facing a big picture of the president (which was the first thing you met when entering the government newspapers) and I had trouble to get him to open up. I did not feel that my respondent facing the enormous picture of the president helped me in my effort. A disturbing element in especially one of the interviews where calling telephones and mobile phones. But then again I asked for a long time of people who were much occupied.

Flexibility to the interview guide

I tried to be as flexible as possible in relation to the guide and naturally I became more independent from the guide after a couple of interviews. The exception was four of my interviews, three where the respondents spoke poor English and one where I used an interpreter. In those cases I found it harder to keep the conversation going by itself and I followed my interview guide more strictly. A bigger problem was that some respondents

talked “too much”, and in some cases I may have stressed the questions a bit to get them back on the track so that we would have time to cover all the themes.

Using a recorder

During all my interviews I used a tape recorder. This worked well and nobody had any objections or seemed to bother. I came to regret this two times during my field work. At one occasion I wanted to listen to the interviews with two of the deputy editors in the government newspapers and I realized that the tapes were empty! Instead of doing the same interviews again I did two new interviews with other deputy editors. The second occasion was when the recorder ran out of battery in the middle of an interview. Luckily I noticed this and changed it. Apparently this disturbed me more than the respondent who just continued where he ended.

Language barriers

A problem in some of the interviews was language barriers. English is neither my own mother tongue nor the first language of my respondents. As mentioned before it was only in three interviews where it became a real problem, but I have tried to be aware of the risk of misinterpretations and misunderstandings in my analysis. My belief is that I asked for clarifications as soon as I thought we did not understand each other properly.

I had to use an interpreter at one interview. Sometimes you have to make fast decisions and this was certainly one of those times. It was my last day and I had after many phone calls got an appointment with one of the news editors. When I came to the newspaper it turned out that he did not feel comfortable in speaking English and that one of the reporters whom I met earlier should translate. With the circumstances in mind I had to accept and continue or not get the information. I chose to continue. The situation was not ideal and I believe that I did not come up with all important follow-up questions.

Two interviews in a row

Of practical reasons I occasionally did two interviews in a row. That was especially the case in the government newspaper since it was a procedure of getting in and out of the building. I believe this was not a very good idea and I felt less concentrated in the end of the second interview. Consequently I left interesting answers, without follow-up questions but instead moved to another question.

Avoiding expected answers

A common problem is that the respondent gives you the answer he or she believes you are expecting (Starring and Renck 1996:64). Since I was interviewing journalists about a subject that might be controversial for some of them, my biggest fear was that I would only get the expected answers, like “yes, we work for the public”, “yes, we take social responsibility”. It might not be the intention, but due to professional norms, protection of status or a fear of being critical, it could happen. Hence, I thought a lot about how I could avoid this before I started and also during the interview. There are different opinions on whether you should always reveal the purpose with your study or not. I decided to be as open as possible and always started my interviews by explaining who I am, what I do and pointed out that I was there as an independent researcher and that they would be anonymous in my report. This could of course be questioned since I for example was going to ask them about taking social responsibility, something the press is being accused of not doing. I believe that people would have been more defensive and closed if I had tried to surprise them with controversial

questions and I also believe that is not good ethics. Instead I tried to avoid expected answers by sometimes playing the role as the “naive” researcher, continuously asking for examples and clarifications about their statements. I also used a lot of so called “probing”, like being silent; repeating their last word, ask them to tell me more or even sometimes confronting them with statements they had made in the beginning of the interview.

Generally I felt I got a good contact with my respondents. I was often surprised by the openness and critical views some of the journalists shared with me (even though some of them were chosen by the news editor, whom in turn had been selected by the director). One senior journalist said that there is no point in complaining since nobody would listen. The fact I was an outsider, ready and interested to listen, could be one explanation. It was actually only on a few occasions that I felt that I might not manage to get behind the “barrier”. These respondents had some things in common; they were middle-aged men working within the state owned newspapers, having long experience. Coming as a young woman asking them about how they conduct their job could be problematic.

Working up of material

After every interview I wrote down my immediate impressions of the situation, the contact we established and things I thought about their answers. When I had two interviews in a row I did it in the end of the second one. I also tried to transcribe the interview as soon as possible.

The interviews were around 1-1 ½ hours, the shortest 50 minutes (when a translator was used). There are different opinions whether it is necessary or not to make a complete transcription, but I chose to transcribe word for word since I felt it necessary to get close to my material. I have pointed out pauses and laughs where I felt it has been important for the understanding of the statement. But since English is not the first language of me or my respondents, I believe it is vulnerable to concentrate too much on selection of words, emphasis of words and pauses since it might just be because they did not find the word they were looking for. To raise the quality I wrote about ten minutes in a row, then listened it through again, correcting what was wrong.

I started my analysis making a matrix with the different themes and questions I had asked about, for instance public interest, social responsibility, individual obstacles, self-censorship etcetera. Afterwards I read the transcriptions one by one trying to identify the journalists’ statement and reflections within those areas. This gave me a good overview of the material. The analysis is structured according to my main questions and I have primarily chosen the quotations I have found most illustrative for the view I want to point out.

Using myself as a research tool

Being a young student from Europe I had thought a lot about what this would mean and how the journalist could be affected by this. I have my Western perspective on journalism and communication, and from that I will ask certain questions and find some things more interesting than others. This was my first visit to Sri Lanka, and I was there trying to grasp the complex situation in seven weeks. Again I must say it was a challenge and something I tried to be aware of throughout my study.

Naturally it would be easier for me to understand the Swedish context, whereas I here did not have a clue what I was going to find. Though some researchers believe it is an advantage to lack knowledge of the subject you want to investigate to look upon things with “fresh eyes”,

others say it is essential to have a lot of knowledge to do a good interview (Sandberg 2000:182). Dahlgren stresses pre-understanding is always a problem in fieldwork, especially the practical understanding (Dahlgren 1996:87). Since I did not know the situation I might ask about things everyone took for granted, still I tried to prepare myself as much as I could, reading about the country and the media situation, as well as talking to people who had been there and also with my contacts at the Sri Lanka Press Institute. It is impossible for me to be sure how my pre-understanding of the press in Sri Lanka has affected my results, but I tried my best to have an open, humble and curious attitude and being careful with judging any answers. This has been most difficult in trying to understand the existence of a state owned media, something that is totally against my own perception of a free press.

Concluding comments about the validity

Since my aim is not to generalize but focus on understanding I will not discuss the reliability of the study, but I will however make some concluding comments on the validity. Validity could be interpreted as whether I have researched what I intended to. Validity demands a well-reasoned selection, relevant questions, a “thick” material and a well done analysis (Larsson 2000:73). Well, my aim has been to reflect upon these questions throughout this chapter. To conclude I do not think I have could have chosen another method in relation to my purpose and I also think I got a wide selection of interviewees. Further more I reflected upon the quality of the interviews and I think my interviewees tried to be as honest as they could. I also think we understood each other, except for three of the interviews mentioned. Nevertheless, since I had so many I believe the total quality of my material is still high. Also, I think I got a “thick” material in the sense the last interviews did not contribute with any really new information. I will though shortly reflect upon my choice of theoretical perspectives and the aim for this thesis.

The point is the aim should steam from the theory. Well, that was for me a problematic aspect and is, as I see it, one of the most critical parts of my study. As mentioned before there are not much research conducted in Sri Lanka or any Asian country similar to my study. Since it has been shown theories and methods steaming from the West do not translate very well to an Asian context I had to build my own theoretical framework. This has resulted in a mixture of theoretical perspectives with their base in different traditions. It also resulted in a wide aim and rather wide main questions, which could of course be questioned. Still I do not think I could have gone out in the field with a more definite plan. I had to be flexible since things could change on the way (which they also did). My aim and main questions have for this reason been reformulated during the process.

One thing I do think I could have done differently concerns the first of my main question. Asking about what role the journalists think the press should have in the society could be interpreted both at a general and personal level and maybe it would have been interesting to focus more on how the journalists interpret their individual responsibility. That is, the question is a bit more abstract than the others which became obvious for me when starting with my analysis. I believe I could have done this more clearly during the interview. But in the end, such a question could maybe been more difficult to answer and resulted in less interesting answers.

Finally, I believe my results could be seen as likely and will hopefully bring some more understanding to a rather non-investigated subject. With this in mind we will move further to my result and analysis.

The role of the press in the society

As mentioned my results and analysis are divided in three parts reflecting my three main questions. In this first part I look closer to the journalists' view of their role and responsibility, the second part deals with the journalists' comprehension about what stories people want and need and the last third part is about what obstacles they meet in their work.

I will start this first analysis chapter by shortly pointing out that the newspapers were organised in different ways. Three titles frequently used are news editor, deputy editor and associate editor and were in different constellations on the different newspaper, depending on the size of the paper and so on. They though had in common they were all giving the assignments to the reporter and deciding what was going to be published.

A very important role

Not surprisingly all journalists said media should play an important role. I think a news editor in one of the private owned newspapers illustrates this comprehension in a good way, saying;

“The press should have a main role to play in the society because after all it is like the convey of the message, basically the messenger. And it's the voice. So I feel because if the voice is dead, then the message does not come out. I feel that the press has a great role to play when it comes to society and its issues.”

Almost all of the journalists also agreed on media having a lot of power to influence people's attitudes, minds and behaviour. They also believed media can influence politics, as six of the interviewees spontaneously said – media has the power to make and break governments, which more or less has happen.

Still on the question about what this role includes, the journalists give different answers. I have tried to crystallize their conceptions in five different main themes, which I think illustrate the different approaches.

The press should inform, educate and guide society to the better

One of the most common answers was that the press should inform, lead, educate or guide people. Generally there was no distinction between inform and educate and a lot of the times it was mentioned in the same sentence. A majority of the journalists said the press should change and influence peoples mind. The press should be, as one journalist in a state owned newspaper explained, like a loud mother. The journalist says;

“Imaging your mum... he...she always loves you. And press must love people as a mother, and as an educated mother. As an educated and very loud mother we have to encourage and we have to lead people.”

The loud mother should know what is best for the child, as media should tell people what is best for them. A journalist at one of the state owned newspapers thought the press can influence people to be responsible by giving correct information. On the question what role he thinks the press should have in the society he answers;

“Well, for the press as well as for the electronic media the first of all is to give the correct information. And also influence public thinking on issues, on political choices on sake of

the economic. To give them the correct information and influence their thinking on subject like education. There is a lot, the newspaper, the press, the print media can do to... to inspire or influence social thinking...

Only one journalist thought there is a difference in attitudes between media that guides and media that educates people. He thought media is sometimes underestimating the public. He says;

“You know, I mean...the press lives with the society but you know, they have to think one step ahead the society. They should be with them. They should not forget them and you know ‘we are the people, we are teaching’. That attitude is wrong. They should be with the people and I also think ahead of them. I mean, the general term is that they are the watch-dog of the society [laugh] I don’t know about watch-dogs, but you know it’s...with that tray you can lead the society to become more and more good. Because you know, you should think one step ahead of them and even you know...you lead them to there. So to do that of course we should have good editors, good readership is essential you know to do something like that.”

As an example of what might happen when you underestimate the public he told a story about the election campaign of the politician Ranil Wickramasinghe and his thoughts about why he lost the election. He tells;

“...Ranil Wickramasinghe used to put a plate, a plate of rice with chicken and stuff like that on the television. Saying that [laugh] people would eat good and eat well you know, something like that. That’s an insult you know! He lost the election for that. You know that the people in villages, they may be acutely poor but they eat well, the Sri Lankans. I know that. Go to their houses, they won’t eat anything you know, they eat rice, but they wouldn’t take their meals without any meat item in their menu, that is the way for the Sri Lankan people...”

I think this is an interesting statement, since few of my interviewees actually talked about the knowledge of the public. To tell people what is good for them in combination with a belief you have the power to change their minds, I think, shows an image of the public as a rather passive and uneducated mass.

The press should show on alternatives and solutions

The role of the press as a guide for alternatives and solutions was only mentioned by journalists working in the private newspapers. A reporter says;

“Press should play...mm...in my views press must be helpful to change the society for better. We must work for better future. Better means, we must understand our weaknesses, we should discuss those things and we should suggest the alternatives also. We can, we should discuss about alternative views, alternative solutions to the problems.”

Another reporter had a similar opinion. He was concerned about community feelings, unemployment and drug problems especially among young people. He thought the press also should write about positive things to motivate and encourage people, although this is not the definition of news. He says;

“So always I use to write something about positive. I’m talking about a positive attitude, positively. For example on the airport there is a flight crashed, so no one will write

about, there is nobody going to write so many planes are coming everyday they all well landed. So what they will write, one flight is crashed today, in a country where it happened. They will not write you all other plans are ok... [laugh]. So the negative side only... every newspaper will write that. I don't say that is wrong, that is the news. But sometimes I think that you have to write to... If they write unemployment is eight percent, they don't write 92 percent is working in Sri Lanka."

He explained he tried to do this in his own reporting, but at the same time said he could not change editorial policy. Sometimes he had argued with the editor about a story he believed was newsworthy whereas the editor did not, though most of the times the news got published.

The press should stand between the people and the politicians

In opposite of showing on alternatives, the role of the press to stand between people and politics were only mentioned by journalists working in the state owned newspapers. One of them used the expression "watch-dog", but the others rather talked about how the press should bring pressure upon politicians to change things in the society. A statement by a journalist in one of the state owned newspapers illustrates this view by explaining the role of the press;

"This is the only thing that can talk to the people and the government, otherwise the government doesn't know what's the people's problem, people don't know what the government is doing you know. Minister can go to one place or he can do anything in Colombo and the outstation people, the up country people, the Jaffna people won't know what's happening here. So we have to play a major role. Only I think, media is the only way to connect the government sector and the people you know. It's a big sledge. You have to, actually in our paper we are not doing that, we have to do..."

Ironically all the journalists who thought this was the role of the press did not think their newspapers were doing this. As a state owned newspaper they said they could not criticize the government. I will come back to this when talking about obstacles.

The press should protect Tamil interests

Generally the journalists in the private Tamil newspaper Virakesari talked more about the conflict and the problems in the North and East, than did the other journalists. When asked about the mission one journalist explained it should be very careful and focus on not violating the conflict. He explains the role of the press in a similar way;

"In our country we are facing a conflict, so we have to act, act to protect the Tamil people's rights, and it's, Sinhala people's harmony. We won't violate those both ethnics. And we should build up a good relationship, with all those communities. That is the press's role, it is."

The press should entertain and earn money

I put this category in the end since the role to entertain was only mentioned by one journalist as well as the role of earning money. Both of them rather seemed to echo what could be considered as "according to the book", even though this might be their personal opinion. Interestingly to earn money was also mentioned by a journalist at one of the state owned newspaper, which I got the impression does not primarily focus on profit. The journalist concludes;

“If you don’t make money others falls flat, if you don’t make money. So there are three, first to educate, inform. This newspaper is mainly to inform the public. That’s the main writing area. Second is to educate. Those are the things.”

Also two of the journalists within the state owned newspaper did not understand the question. One of the journalists said “yes, the press has an important role”, but could not describe how. The other journalist did not at all understand my question, and I got a feeling he may not wanted to answer.

Defining public interest

To define public interest is not easy. It became obvious that there are many different interpretations of the meaning of the concept. Notwithstanding I have crystallized the three most common definitions of what it could mean; writing about things of interest for the whole nation, writing about what concerns ordinary people and acting as a watchdog. Though I want to point out there are no waterproof lines between them. To expose corruption could be of interest for the whole nation, as well as what concerns ordinary people and so on. Still, the journalists themselves usually gave examples related to one of the themes.

I tried to get spontaneous answers by first asking if the journalists thought their newspaper was working in the public interest. The journalist then said yes or no and I continued by asking in what way. Interestingly, in a few of the interviews the journalists without any doubt said “yes we are working in the public interest”, but when I asked them to give examples they asked me how I defined it. I think the words of one of the news editors at a private owned newspaper illustrate the complexity of the concept. On the question how to define public interest the news editor says;

“Public interest, you have to say what exactly that is to, because it could mean social issues, it could mean awareness of public funds and public property. It has so many things in it. But in the end of the day, yes it is about public awareness and all that but how exactly do you define it? That’s the main issue like how do you define it, because as I said we concentrate on all this like social issues and development issues and all these issues of corruption and public property, everything. So I feel that to us public awareness means creating awareness about everything. Without picking an issue and ok, we highlight this we won’t highlight this. You know, we can’t choose it’s up to the people to choose on what they want to know and what they don’t want to know. To us to highlight it, to make sure that it is there in print. Whoever wants to read it can read it, whoever doesn’t it’s their choice.”

It is then defines it as raising awareness, but this statement also highlights another aspect. The news editor, together with two other journalists were the only one of my interviewees saying it is up to the readers to decide, to choose what they think and what they want to read. In conclusion, I think this illustrates that it is a politically correct to answer yes, but much harder to define what you mean.

Public interest is writing about things beneficial to the whole nation

Some of the journalists interpreted the concept of public interest as writing about things that concerns and are beneficial to the whole country. It could be about building a platform for peace by trying to raise understanding between the ethnic groups or highlighting social problems.

On the question how she would define public interest, a journalist in the state media interprets it as a responsibility against the public. She says;

“That is...we must know what is public interest, right? Public interest is the interest of the whole country, right. The whole country. So you look into the whole country and work accordingly./.../for example now you get the social ills, like drug addicts and drugs, drug violence, smuggling and things like that, so in that sense the press can do a lot of wonders.”

Two other journalists also thought their newspapers worked in the public interest by contributing to understanding between the different ethnic groups. They said they tried to bridge the gap between the ethnic groups by empathizing Tamils in the North with Sinhalese in the South and vice versa. This was seen as the first step to create peace, which is of interest to the whole country. A reporter explains how they do this by focusing on the peace talk;

“Public interest in the sense like you know...like I said...the peace process, that is in public interest, right. You stop the fighting and it’s going to be beneficial in the end to the public. So we want to like, we have to go for a federal system, we have to make people understand, what’s in this Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslims and Burghers and all these people understand this is good, in our own good, in the good of our country, and so this is in their interest. Ultimately you stop the defence expenditures and the budget, whatever the funds comes you can use it for education, for development of the country. Then in whose interest? That is in the public interest.”

The other journalist, who worked at one of the Tamil papers talked about the newspaper having a responsibility to educate Tamils about what Sinhalese thinks. He said the newspaper is doing this by educating their readers. He defines what he means with educating;

“Educate mean in...we concern ethnic problem also. Many Tamil peoples don’t know Sinhala. They have no chance to read the Sinhala newspaper or something, they don’t know what the Sinhala people are thinking. Here, we have paper, we can educate what the Sinhala people are thinking. They also don’t like war. Because normally Sinhala people are thinking all Tamils are LTTE, Tamil people are thinking all Sinhala people is like army, they will kill us. So we have to educate them like that.”

According to the journalist they do this in their newspaper by publishing translations what they consider important articles from the Sinhala newspaper. In that way they believe Tamil people get to know what the Sinhala readers think.

Also a news editor at one of the state owned newspaper explained how they give a service to the people, which is beneficial to the country. He defined public interest as “literate the public” and meant the paper was doing this by giving people knowledge on current affairs and involving them in the state’s business. He explains his view;

“Well.... Getting...getting the public involved, in the affairs of the state, and in the parliamentary affairs. Getting... giving them the knowledge and giving them...educate them, giving them up-to-date on the affairs, on the current affairs and on the affairs of the world. So I think that that is a great service we do, to literate the public. How Sri Lanka, the literacy rate is high, 90 percent in Sri Lanka, so we have to, we are doing a great service to them, by bringing them up-to-date, giving them aware of the material, to get them to form their opinion on what is... on... on the real home. To get them, to know about the current situation, current affairs and the real context they are living in. I think

that that service, we sort of, we contribute to their literary advancement it's a lot of things, how the public benefit from the newspaper."

Public interest is writing about what concerns ordinary people

The second most common answer of what it means to work in the public interest was to highlight the problems of the ordinary people. Furthermore, to write from ordinary people's perspective and write about things that affects them. A reporter illustrates this by saying;

"As I said...we...from the normal person's point of view. How he or she...how a normal person...what their problems are like. Basically from the people's point of view, that is public interest."

In practise this could be a story about raising prices, the current political situation, the problems of the paddy farmers, sufferings from the conflict or echoes of the tsunami.

Another journalist at a state owned newspaper thought a newspaper working in the public interest should focus on the ordinary people's problem rather than highlight the elite; though the journalist did not think the newspaper do that. The journalist explains;

"Every news we have to write first, in my opinion, first people get their...people give money and buy the newspapers to read what is... what is happening to them, you know. What is happening to them. We can't give publicity to ministers and big people. They are always big you know. When we give publicity or not, they are big, they have money, they have all facilities, but poor people they don't you know. We have to write, if there is any problem in Trincomalee, first we have to write other peoples you know. In Trincomalee they face many problems, they can't go to town, these things, they starved and they were hiding in their houses, school children are not going to their schools. Today there is second term, reopened today. In Trincomalee there was not single child going to school."*

Also another critical journalist in one of the state owned newspapers agrees with this statement and said the newspaper is rather working in the interest of the politicians.

Public interest is acting as a watch-dog

Two journalists in one of the private owned newspapers defined public interest as writing what the government is doing with people's money and exposing corruption, because that is what people want to read. I asked one of them for an example of a story and the journalist told me a story about one of the biggest frauds in Sri Lanka now being exposed by the newspaper;

"There is one of the biggest fraud in Sri Lanka that some ten or twenty business men have not registered their company and they've got I think over six billion rupees from the government and claiming the VAT. So that is the biggest fraud ever in Sri Lanka I think. So the government is probing an investigation and it was very much public interest story. So people are concerned about this, the follow-ups. And they are very interested in this kind of news item and we... actually also, every day we are leading the stories and we know that public is interested about this fraud. So that's the biggest..."

This story did not only make the newspaper sell more copies, it also made them work as a watch-dog. Also a journalist at one of the state owned newspapers defined public interest as

* Trincomalee is a city situated at the east coast of Sri Lanka which has been badly affected of the civil war and during my time in the country the city was the target of several bomb blasts and violence.

exposing corruption. But as the journalist explained “... we are not that much keen on exposing corruption or anything”.

Some newspapers are working in the public interest, others are not

All the journalists in the private media believed their newspaper was working in the public interest, even though some of them said they could do it even more. Some journalists also said it is essential otherwise people would not buy the newspaper, thus interpreted primarily as what people want rather than what might be for the common good.

The situation was somewhat different in the state owned newspapers. More than half of the journalists I met in Dinamina, Thinakaran and Daily News did not think their newspapers were working in the public interest. Some of them were very critical saying the newspaper is only a voice of the government. Others believed they sometimes worked in the interest of the public, sometimes in the interest of the politicians. (I think it is interesting to see the definition of truth this journalist hold in the quotation below, lying is more defined as not adding incorrect facts than giving the whole picture). A journalist explains how this may work;

“But I mean in government newspapers sometimes, not all the time, sometime we write thing from the government point of view, highlighting the points that the government want highlighted. Sometimes it’s useful I think, you’re not lying, just publishing that the way that the government wants, not adding anything else. You’re not adding anything you know, trying to deceive the public. So we do these things sometimes in the interest of the public, sometimes in the interest of the politicians... you know. We could have done more you know if conditions were good and if there was no conflict in the country.”

I also learned the question about public interest could be sensitive. One of the journalists working at a state owned newspapers did not want to answer the question and just said it was a “deep question” he could not comment.

“Of course we have a social responsibility”

Naturally all of my interviewees answered yes on the question if the press has a social responsibility. I believe that is the politically correct answer in the same way as concerned public interest. Though I was more interested to see how they would define this responsibility and whether they thought they were taking it or not and in what way.

Generally social responsibility was defined as raising awareness about social problems of the society, acting as “voice of the voiceless”. It could be writing about poverty, street children, rapes or human rights issues with a hope it would lead to some kind of change. A deputy editor gives a typical answer about what social responsibility could be;

“Anything concerns the people, the sufferings you know. You know nowadays, elder people, older people are not looked after properly. Any of their story, a small story. You can get so many, you know, you walk around Colombo, you know they’re destitute. They had a home you know, all these people were living in homes. But now what, they’ve been toiling for their kids and all, they’ve been chased away. You know, some places they grabbed the home and everything, throw the parents out of the house. Those things are still happening. So things like that you can spotlight in a way. So it will catch the eye of the government, the people’s concern for this department or whoever, and they can do something on that. And street children, there are so many good stories about street

children. So if you spot something nice like that it will touch your heart. And you can do something as a social responsible newspaper, you can do something for that.”

Some of the journalists also gave examples of when they had spotlighted a problem which had led to some kind of change, most of the times that people had resulted in inquiries. When asked for an example of an article in which the newspaper was taking social responsibility, a journalist showed on an article about a school girl who was raped by a teacher. He points out what consequences an article like that could have;

“This is happening in up-country side, hill country side. So there are people who are very low educated and a...this type of incidents will stop the educations, they won't go again to school. So earlier there is a case, a girl murdered, raped and murdered, a school girl. So we focus this and the minister who is handling this he ordered for urgent, immediate inquiries for this problem. So...this type of crimes won't be, they will stop and awareness, the people will get awareness from this.

Further more social responsibility was by a few defined as not whipping up communal feelings. A news editor, who pointed out that the press has a role to work for peace, explains his view of the meaning of social responsibility;

“If we give wrong information, so if we give wrong messages people will get violate and ethnic conflict will start rose, we have social responsibility that type. We should protect them, so we shouldn't give wrong messages or disinformation for them. That is the main responsibility.”

“But we may not take it to the full extent”

Still, the majority of the journalists did not believe they were taking social responsibility, at least not to the full extent. Most critical against the performance of their newspapers were some of the journalists working in the state owned daily newspapers Thinakaran and Dinamina, but it was also mentioned by a journalist working at the Sunday Leader. One of them said the newspaper is taking social responsibility “*kind of 50-50*”. I asked the journalist in what way the paper is not taking this responsibility and the journalist answers;

“When you see the front page stories, you see... political parties, politicians...not people. But people are somewhere behind, inside the news section the... people should be in the front. In that aspect the Sunday Leader is also, that's the drawback of the Sunday Leader also. It's front page, the civilians should be... I mean the priority should be given to them. That's what I feel so... It should change.”

There was though a comprehension among some of the journalists that it will take time to change, because it is about changing peoples wants and they have to be trained to appreciate these kinds of stories about social problems. For example a journalist at one of the state owned newspapers thought the newspaper should put positive articles at the front page, for example if there is a big donation to an orphanage. I asked him if the newspaper where he works is giving priority to those stories today and he answers;

“We are doing it, we are doing it, I think I...we have to sell our newspaper as well. We can't do it that fast, you know. After all it's a matter of buying and selling no. We have to sell our newspaper.”

Also a deputy editor at one of the private newspapers explains how people must be trained to appreciate social stories;

“Duty is we have to talk about the problems of the society. Especially the human rights problem, the women’s problem, the youth problems. So we have to address, to hear the stories of those people and we have to give the chance to...chance from our newspaper to those society people. Sometimes it’s not marketable or it’s not good for the circulation, but we have to do... we have to train the people also, our readers to read those news items or articles.”

Though some journalists thought things are changing, and one news editor said people are starting to realize that highlighting social issues will increase the readership and that the more you write, the more people want to know.

A personal reflection is the definitions of public interest and social responsibility overlap and the interviewees often repeat themselves. Either they might think it is the same thing even if they do not say that, or the want to get away from the answer. Interestingly a journalist working in the state media was very critical saying the newspaper was not working in the public interest at all, but still took social responsibility. The journalists definition of public interest was writing a balanced story, publishing “both sides” while social responsibility was giving valuable information, like when the holidays start or publishing the students exam results. Only one journalist explicitly said public interest goes hand in hand with social responsibility. On my question on the meaning of social responsibility the journalist answers almost a bit irritated;

“I think I was explaining it to you earlier, like they have to know what the people... The media’s social responsibility is like you know how to make people understand that they are... accountability. Transparency in the governing, and it’s all about that. That’s the time, I think all the time we were talking about the public interest, it’s in the public interest when you expose a corruption then again it’s in the public interest. If you try to...so in that sense you try to reach the gap between North and South and then again it’s in the public interest. It’s again media social responsibility, of the media. Public interest, and I think the public interest and the media responsibility goes hand in hand.”

Conclusions

The first of my main questions was to see how the journalists’ look upon their role and responsibility and I can conclude that the main roles according to the journalists were to inform, educate and guide the society for the better. Furthermore they should show on solutions and alternatives, stand between people and politicians (passing on information rather than acting as a watch-dog), care about Tamil interest (as said by journalists in the private Tamil newspaper) and to some extent entertain and make money. Nobody spontaneously said work in the public interest.

Generally when asked about the concepts the journalists disagreed on the definition of public interest rather than social responsibility. Public interest was defined as working in the interest of the whole society (with focus on educating and informing), writing about what concerns ordinary people, and being a watch-dog exposing corruption (or telling people what the government do with their tax money). Everyone naturally thinks it is important to take social responsibility, which is primarily defined as raising awareness about social problems in the society (also with focus on educating). Still, several of the journalists especially in the state

owned newspaper do not think they work in the interest of the public, but rather in the interest of the politicians. Some also think they are not taking the social responsibility they could.

I believe this chapter reveals many problematic aspects. One of them is the blurred interpretations of the concepts. Public interest is both defined as working in the interest of the common good as stated in the policy documents, as well as giving people what they want what, in McQuail terms called the majoritarian perspective. The interpretation of social responsibility is more homogeneous and in line with the policy document. Though a reason for this could be, that saying you are working in the public interest and taking social responsibility are politically correct answers, often said without any deeper thought. Secondly, journalists in Sri Lanka are as mentioned not yet considered as a professionalized group. In comparison with for instance Sweden professional norms are not yet internalised to the same extent. For example only three of my respondents do at all have a journalistic education, some have a University degree but in other subjects, while the majority started as trainees or local correspondents. With that in mind I rather think their answers are surprisingly similar.

In regard to the four roles of the press (inform, comment, be a watch-dog and encourage communication between groups), the journalists mainly focus on their role to inform the public even though some mention acting as a watchdog. Few talk about commenting (which they do when talking about features) and no one talks about contributing to communication between different groups, rather to form the minds of different communities. To be a watch-dog is mentioned by some of the journalists, but instead of being a watch-dog in the sense a critical investigator of people in power, it is rather standing between the people and the politicians as a transmitter of information. If you are not allowed to criticize the power, there is no way you can act as a watch-dog. Moreover, you can not defend democracy as stated in the Code of Ethics. Ironically the ideal of being a watch-dog was mentioned by journalists at the state owned newspaper and I believe McCargo's question "who own's the dog?" could not be more suitable.

In my opinion one of the most interesting results is the image the journalists indirectly have of the public. According to Althugala the press has been accused of not stopping violations against Human Rights and exposing corruption. He says it is because of state-centric bias, but I also believe it could be because the comprehension among journalists is that the readers are not "ready" for those stories. They have to be trained to appreciate a story about Human Right problems.

Generally many of the definitions and examples circled around how you should educate people in the best way and how you should change people's mindset and gives a picture of a public who do not know what is best for them and who is not really capable of making the right decisions. The journalist is seen as the expert, while the readers become passive receivers rather than critical and active readers. This I believe, when seen in relation to the three democratic models mentioned earlier, is a clear example of the so called competition model where politicians act, citizens react and the media or politicians set the agenda. As mentioned, only few of the journalists questioned this image.

Finally, there are journalists who feel they have a mission to change the situation and who are fighting for the citizen's right to know. This will become clearer in following chapters.

The stories people want and need

Parts of my questions focused around the media content and what at all should be in the newspaper. I asked the journalists what they believed are important to cover, what they think is a good and a bad story, whether they use ordinary people in their reporting as well as how they know what the public want to read.

Thus, if you think you have a mission to guide people, show on alternatives, standing between the public and the politicians, being the voice of the voiceless and make people understand their context, this should be reflected in what stories that are believed to be good and important. Though, this was not always the case.

With focus on politics

The most common answer on what the journalists believed were important to cover was “everything”, what is “hot” and important depends on the situation. As one journalist expressed it referring to something he had read in an American book “*there are no dull reports, only dull reporters*”. Still many of them numbered; politics, business, education, crime, public transport, culture, science and health. Usually they started with politics. In almost all the interviews the journalist mentioned the area of his or her own specialisation as one of the most important areas.

Though, I think the most interesting result of this question was several of the journalists believed politics was very important, still they thought they focus too much on politics and insufficient on human interest, like human rights issues or problems of women and children. The major reason was because politics is what people are expecting, and it sells.

Generally the state newspapers said they had to put politics on the front page, not because it was said in any policy, but it is how things normally work. Like one journalist says whether they have to always publish politics on the front page “*Yeah yeah. Our front page is always politics, politics and politics, social, peace and all that...*”. Though, the fact newspapers are focusing too much on politics was the opinion of journalists working in both state owned newspapers and private newspapers, in all three languages. I think this is well illustrated by the words of a journalist working at a private newspaper. On the question on what areas he believes are important to cover he tells what people want;

“In Sri Lanka I think... in people’s view they are more concerned about politics and the violence, and you know, we are now having peace talks between LTTE and Sri Lankan government. So nowadays that is hot. So we have to cover on that line. Sometimes means we are having election, means we have to cover them. So it depends in Sri Lanka. Yesterday we had a clamour attack. So we should lead that news, back up thing, we have to come out with the facts. So it will change sometimes. You can’t tell this is the thing.”

But when I ask what he in the opposite does not think are important to cover he answers;

“In my personal opinions we don’t care a damn about those politics. See, I don’t like politics so much. They are corrupted everywhere. So we are simply you know, we are simply. Every day we are writing, we went for some conference or official leader tells like this, opposition tells like this, they will give something so... build up houses and all this stuff, ok. And every day we are writing... I think that, we have to motivate people, we have to give something... If I write you know, sometimes I read some books and I cried.

Seriously, while reading the book I cried. So that is the power of writing. So sometimes that kind of thing will change you."

A young journalist in the private press who had just started believed following the politicians and forgetting the people is the tradition within the newspaper and I believe the quotation above illustrate it. Two of the reporters in the state media also said the insufficient coverage of social stories was due to the news editor and management, who believe politics and crime are most important. For the majority of the news editors I met this also seemed to be the case. A deputy editor at a state owned newspaper tells what is important;

"Today is political side and political economy and defence sides. The latest and very important incidents and other cases. That's the main news."

Another journalist was of the same opinion, saying human rights issues and justice are important areas, but nowadays people are expecting news about the peace talk. He explains how the newspaper has to focus on politics since that is what people are expecting;

"... I mean what topic is current. We always try to focus on that. Suppose there is, now for instance, now during this period are solely focusing on these peace talks in Geneva. Most I mean... our lead story will be focusing on the peace talks, because the people, the attention of the people on this. Be held, when is it going to be held, will it collapse, so all that... The lead story will be based on that until this talks starts and it continues, continue. So our, I mean, we are guided on those lines. If something drastic happens, if there is a big blast somewhere, 15 soldiers get killed so then we have to shift attention to that. It depends on the varieties, the...populace and the seriousness of the story."

Interestingly four of the journalists said the newspaper will not sell if you do not put politics on the front page. A journalist at a private newspaper explained you have to go for politics if you want a popular paper. When discussing how come there was not more news about social problems and especially human rights in Sinhala newspapers, the journalist explains the preoccupation on politics;

"Right...we are not doing... things to the society on a grand scale. That is correct. Actually our all newspapers are very much concerned about the political news. You know, that's the very popular news. If you want a popular newspaper you have to go especially through the political news and the police round."

Representatives high up in the hierarchy in one of the newspapers, who I met shortly for an informal talk, shared this opinion. Since a couple of months back the paper had daily published a page spotlighting social problems and poverty of the hill people in the North and Northeast. This page was regarded as very popular among the readers. Also politicians had called the editorial, being irritated and saying they felt pressured to do something. Still, front page was about politics since that, according to the representatives, is what sells. They told they had tried to put other news in the front page, but then the newspaper did not sell as good.

A deputy editor at a one of the newspapers explains how the management is not really interested in stories about social problems, even though he is of the opinion that the newspaper has a duty to do more than just sell copies;

"Duty is we have to talk about the problems of the society. Especially the human rights problem, the women's problem, the youth problems. So we have to address, to hear the stories of those people and we have to give the chance to...chance from our newspaper to

those society people. Sometimes it's not marketable or it's not good for the circulation, but we have to do..."

He explains that one of the journalists went abroad and is now writing a column on human rights problems;

"Now also she is writing the human rights stories. But the thing is the management and our circulation department are not very much interested about these stories because that's not... I think that... it's not marketable stories. They always think about the market."

Still he talked a lot about the circulation, which newspaper has the highest, which is number two and so on. He explained how they push the reporters and keeps them "hungry" for new news by not telling them the actual figures of the circulation. In that way they will not just lean back on their chairs, but go for the exclusive stories about for example corruption. Once the newspaper experienced a drop in circulation and they then introduced a new provincial supplement. This was already done by their concurrent and after that they could see that circulation going up again.

Two of the deputy editors also told they would routinely search their papers for missed stories, and question the reporter within that field why the news was not there. Sometimes they would order a follow-up. In opposite to the daily mainstream newspapers in Sweden, newspapers in Sri Lanka are mainly selling on free copies. That means they compete harder on an every-day basis.

What people want

While the common opinion among the journalists were that the newspapers focus too much on politics, this is at the same time what half of my interviewees thought people want to read. The other half thought people mainly want gossip, sensational stories and human interest, though there were different opinions whether it could always be given to people or not.

People want to read about the current political situation

At the time of the interview the current political topic was the peace process (see introduction and background). The peace talk was identified as "hot" news. Journalists at Dinamina and Thinkaran said people want to know the standpoint of the government and how they are going to solve the conflict. In other words focus was the government's view. Journalists working at Daily News have a somewhat different approach saying people want critical comments from different perspectives on the current political situation.

In some of my interviews it was mentioned that the readership wanted different news about the war depending on if they were Sinhalese or Tamils. Even though everyone pointed out they have to be balanced (which basically meant publishing both sides – LTTE and the government) a reporter says,

"In our community, Tamils like...the advantage news, which is good news for LTTE, that news Tamil people like. And now Canada banned the LTTE, Tamil people think that is sad. When we, in the lead story, they don't like. But all Sinhala newspapers lead story that Canada banned, the Sinhala newspaper Canada ban the LTTE that's a lead story, because Sinhala people like."

This is also confirmed by a journalist in a Sinhala newspaper. On the question were the newspaper stands in the conflict the journalist answers;

“In the conflict... Sometimes we are very balanced... sometimes we are biased stories Sinhalese... very radical groups. Because of... I think because of our readership is Sinhalese, reading and speaking readership. So we have to think about that./.../... this is my thinking that all the news, Sinhala newspapers are going towards some kind of biased story of the government or the Sinhalese majority worship I think. I think that is because of the readership.”

Also a journalist at Thinkaran pointed out they have to think about the Muslims, since they are an important group of their readership.

People want gossip, sex and human interest stories

When asked what stories the public wants, six of the journalists both within state owned and private owned press spontaneously said human interest stories. Some of them though defined human interest stories as focusing on social issues and problems, while others mainly talked about human interest stories as entertainment and gossip.

A journalist explained his view of what the public want. With Television around he pointed out it is necessary for the survival of the newspaper to focus more on human interest stories, new features, angles and ways of presenting stories. He explains;

“Today, in today’s context, I can tell you frankly they like human interest stories most. Because this peace process and peace talks are now becoming still. So they want something new, human interest stories. Where the children... problems of children, problems of their parents, the cost of, how the costs of living affects them and that type of thing like that. And you get examples from...from the out stages, from the provincial places, things like certain cases where families have...have suicides, the reasons for those. Things like that. So that type of thing newspapers readership will like more than what they see everyday, which is a staple on the television and everywhere which is peace talks and the LTTE, and of course they still command the more attention, the priority but people like to read, the newspaper readers something more, something extra. So that is what we are trying to do here, that is part of our role that new dimension into the readership.”

Another journalist with the same opinion though points out you can get people interested by giving them something new;

“They read sensationalisation because that is what catches their eyes, but certain stories you can’t do that. I mean like social issues and all that you can’t sensationalise it so what you need to think is that the reader wants something new. Ok like, the fact that Sri Lanka has HIVs or that Sri Lanka has a lot of social workers is a known thing, people know that. But what they need to know is that it has either increased or decline and the reason for it, or the impact it has had on the people or maybe extract one family out of the whole large and bringing out one example you know and say the impact that it has had on that family. Things like that like if it is different people will definitely read.”

However some journalists thought you could not only give people what they want without thinking about the consequences, as a reporter says; “you can’t give like ok for a twelve or thirteen year old child, you just can’t write some porno stuff, because they want.” A deputy

editor explained that they give people what they want; even if it may not be good for society. At the same time pointing out that he does not share this opinion;

“People like to read them yes that’s right. We are always giving those stories because of people like that stories. They like to read the gossips [laugh], so they like to read the human interest gossips, sex, like that. So in one time our daily newspaper was very popular with a column called ... [Mentions the name of the column], so it’s... we are always publishing the sex oriented news stories. So some newspapers attack us, we are doing bad things to the society. Because we are going for the public, we are publishing the sex stories, like that. But people have accepted our ... then that day our newspaper was very popular with that column. But I think that it’s nothing then to the society. It’s only in the interest of the gossipers.”

Still he talked a lot about how he believed the newspaper were not following the trends and how they could attract young readers with more easy stories. As an example he told me about a new music program, a super star program and said it has become *“the crazy in the hold island”*. I do not judge this, but I do question the strength of his personal standpoint.

A critical journalist at one of the state owned newspapers had an interesting thought. The journalist saw people as victims, being “brainwashed” by private television who only wanted to sell their products. This, the journalist believed had affected the newspapers as well. Therefore people, especially the youth, wanted more entertainment. As a consequence features had more influence on people’s mind than news. The reporter explains,

“Then that’s the reality. That’s why, that’s why that thing is always happening in newspapers also. And... in here...in feature section, normally not for news we can’t totally effect to the peoples mind you know, in entertainment side. In feature section they...they always try to protect our culture and protect our past and all those things.”

To tell a good story and avoid a bad one

I asked the journalists to give me an example of a good story. They defined a good story as balanced, having impact, being investigative, involving people and being exclusive with top sources. A good story could be highlighting poverty in hope of changing the situation, to sensational stories about corrupt politicians that would sell many copies. In other words, a good story could aim to work for the common good or to sell big numbers.

Generally I believe the comprehension of a good story reflected the attitudes the interviewees hold throughout the interview. For example if a journalist believes people want to read about the current political situation, a story about the conflict or peace process is a good story. If the journalist thinks people mainly want human interest stories that concern them, a story about how a bus strike affects people is a good story.

A good story is balanced

There was generally a preoccupation with balance; as long as the news tells both sides (the government and LTTE) it is a good story. Though with a few exceptions all the journalists I met in the state owned newspaper said they could only give the government side, thus the story was not balanced. One exception was a deputy editor working in one of the government newspapers, who throughout the interview focused on political news. The deputy editor said a good story is about the current political situation and talked about how the newspaper focused

on giving “top” stories to their readers. I asked what a “top” story could be and the deputy editor points out a story in the newspaper in front of us and says;

“Yes. This one is top story [points at the lead story at the front page] therefore today this country... all people are asking what is happening Northeast, every day clamour, mines... every day die many forces, persons in forces who are doing these cases. LTTE some times are, LTTE is one of the terrorist organisation, they deny...they deny these cases, these clamour or bomb blasts. All deny LTTE. Therefore our readers are thinking who is done these cases they don’t know. Therefore this news is best news, while SLMM Sri Lanka Monitory Mission chief, he told, this fault he blamed to LTTE, that’s a good news“

My interpretation is that this is not only a story about politics; it is served government interest since LTTE is “the bad guy”. Also a journalist at the private Tamil paper said a story should be balanced, but defined a good story as good for the Tamil community. I also think it is interesting that none of the interviewees when talking about a balanced story reflected upon *how* the story was told and presented. I think the statement above clearly illustrated this dilemma.

A good story has impact

The journalists at The Sunday Leader focused more than the others on the impact of the story and one of the journalists says;

“If you can bring some sort of change you know may be good and we all want something good, but some sort of change I would say that is a good story. A bad story is something that basically is flat. Which has no impact, nothing at all.”

The journalists at The Sunday Leader said they often discussed the possible impact of the stories in the newsroom. This did not seem to be the case in the editorials of the other newspapers. Although as a weekly they do have other pre-requisites than the dailies, regarding deadlines and the time readers have on a Sunday compared to working days. Still I believe the strong focus on impact is clear in following description of how the newspaper differs from other weeklies;

“Well, basically as I said earlier like we believe in investigative journalism so that’s what we go ahead with like we always through that as well as other ways we concentrate on social issues a lot. Specially, specially in our midweekly you would see like we have an environmental column and we have like a consumer watch, we have like a column on the sport, issues that people face day-to-day like or on the road like public transport. Things like that. So that’s why I think we are different, because we highlight a lot of issues./.../. it’s not a one-off thing like, we don’t write an article and forget about it. We do follow-ups until something is done.”

Also a journalist at one of the state owned newspapers thought a good story should change things. Though, when asked to give an example of a good story the journalist gave an example from The Island, a private English newspaper which is not part of my study. The journalist explains how this article was a good story;

“There was a mother with four or five children living in the street without her husband died. And I think the mother in law chased from the house. She was living in the road, street. Then a reporter was going over that side, with small, small kids, the mother was sleeping you know. This lady... there is no, any protection to any age you know, the gents will treat ladies, something wrong way in any age you know. So the lady with the four

kids were sleeping in the street and the reporter he seen that and he just went and asked what happened, and pictures and he wrote a big article, in Island newspaper. And the president, minister or someone read the article, next day they went that lady 'we saw about you in the newspaper, then we came here', then think they given a home and education to the children. Like those things happen... "

A good story is investigative

The Sunday Leader was mentioned several times by journalists working at other newspapers, as an example of a newspaper with impact, but also because of their investigative approach. When asked to give an example of a good story a journalist mentioned an investigative story published in the Sunday Leader;

"I think the Sunday Leader they are doing very good stories about investigative type of thing with regard to [says the name of a journalist] some other stories she does like, she's exposing corruption in the top places in the government. Like recently they made, not recently I think it's about two or three years back, it doesn't matter right, the time doesn't matter right?"

Me: No.

So two, three years back they made certain, it's about this state airline. The state airline, the government had sold it to, it was Emirates...you know some other country, international airline. So they said there was a corruption inside it. So they like they went into details and they exposed the entire thing..."

Other journalists within state owned newspapers also thought a good story should be investigative, even though they did not do it themselves. One journalist working in one of the state owned newspapers said there is no time to do investigative journalism in a daily newspaper.

A good story involves ordinary people

Although only mentioned by a reporter at Lankadeepa, some of the examples of a good story have a thing in common; they are stories where the journalist has been out on the field talking to ordinary people. As a Swede I was surprised of the extent of "telephone-journalism", how rare the journalists seemed to go out from the office unless there was a press conference. Still, stories from the field were remembered and seemed to satisfy the reporters.

Two examples were about a hospital strike where the journalists also had talked to the patients, not only the hospital director and doctors. A third one was about a transport strike and asking ordinary people how they were affected. A reporter says;

"... earlier I did transport ministry, at that time there are so many strikes in bus, railway. Then we, I had good stories no. I talked to people, passengers, and ask their troubles and we can write the schools, children, offices, everybody who was late today because of the strike. Face so many problems you know. That I think is a good story. So we can write both side no. We can criticise the owners of the bus strikes, we can write what the people face problems..."

For two of the journalists working in the state owned newspapers these stories were also example of balanced stories, though in areas not considered sensitive. Journalists in The Dinamina and Thinakaran told me they can only publish statements by ordinary people as

long as they do not criticise the government. The journalist covering the transport strike said the editor allowed it since the people did not criticise any of the ministers.

A good story is exclusive with top sources

Naturally some journalists also said a good story is news breaking and exclusive. This is well illustrated by the deputy editor at one of the private newspapers. The journalist focused a lot on circulation figures and a defines a good story as;

“Surely exclusive story is a good story. That means exclusive for my newspaper. You mean... sometimes our reporters are getting the exclusive stories, specially the cabinet stories and political stories or police stories. So if you think of an exclusive story, that’s a good story for us.”

This statement shows the story should not only be exclusive, it should also be about high authorities, which was also explicitly expressed by three other interviewees. The focus on the elite and high political leaders was obvious in the majority of my interviews. With a few exceptions every journalist I met had their ministries to cover and their standard sources. This could be ministers themselves, media spokesmen of parties, organisations and institutions. The routine of the morning was to start calling your sources.

The answers and examples did not surprise me, but what really did was the fact that five of the journalists in the state owned newspaper could not give an example of a good story from their own newspaper. Instead they gave examples from private newspapers; often stories they believed were balanced, investigative or had impact like the story of the woman on the street.

To sum up, in opposite of a good story a bad story was usually said to be what the good story was not: common, without impact, without context, without evidence, bad for the Tamils as well as sensational gossip that hurt the individual. Although when giving an example of a bad story several of the journalists also thought a bad story creates tension and adds fire to the conflict (some of them referred to a bitter lesson learned in 1983*), even though contributing to unifying communities was only mentioned by one of the reporters when describing a good story.

To use ordinary people in news

I thought if you believe it is important to tell stories from ordinary people’s point of view and touch them, you would also frequently use ordinary people in your articles. Well, this does not seem to be the case in most of the newspapers. Most of the times the journalists were rather surprised of my question whether they use ordinary people (“the man on the street”) in their articles. A common answer was “it depends”. A usual answer was also you use ordinary people when it comes to feature articles about social problems but not in news. (Which I believe is interesting since that could be interpreted as social problems are always features, not news). As a reporter explains; *“We will use the people in the articles, in our journalism not use in the news.”*

When ordinary people are part of the article it rather seemed to be to tell their opinion about things like the change of the standard time or the higher living costs. A common answer was

* As mentioned 1983 is seen as the starting point for the civil war (for further information see *About Sri Lanka* “Over two decades of civil war”. There is a comprehension media created the riot in Colombo because of their way of reporting, and that the violence could otherwise have been avoided.

it also depends on the area you are set to cover. A reporter covering science said there are not many connections with people on the street. Since she had been given this field there was nothing she could do about it, though she was frustrated. She says;

“In science and technology field there are not so many connections between the street people and we no, can you understand? Then I like to do that, I like to do that, but a... a... I hope to do that. I can say that. I have... they gave me a field no, they gave me a field no, then what should I do? If I do something, that means something... something over that field, there may be some difficulties with the other journalists. They say, that when we have that one to cover that and all those things. Normally, in my own I have so many connection with the street peoples and all those low level peoples and in my own is happening always and every day, but I can't bring all the problems in the field to here. They have, there are... there is a barrier, no...”

More commonly people were used as sources when gathering ideas of news items. A journalist says;

“You can get some scope news from them. They will tell you where, where... for example this area somebody is dealing with heroine. For example I'm telling. So better than police, better than us, ordinary people knows who is handling those things, who is selling, who is buying. Everything they can update. So we can take scope news as well there.”

Though a journalist at one of the private newspapers believes it can be risky to use ordinary people as sources. On the question if they use ordinary people in the articles the journalist explains;

“For news no. But you maybe think that for human interest story or the... Sometimes ordinary people are...give a call to the editorial and they are saying that some kind of thing was happening in that area. So please look for that or please cover that news item. So soon after we have sent our reporter or we are telling our correspondents to look after that things. Like that. So normally we are not so much dependent on the people sources.

Me: ...ah...

Cause it's very risky.

Me: In what way is it risky?

Risky means if you think of the credibility of the news. And also the... what do you call... Special the credibility. You know... one of your... your neighbour can give an incorrect story about you. For example like that so, we can't write down the story without checking on you so like that. Actually in Sri Lanka most of the newspapers are not dependent on people sources. They are always with the trade unions, with the department head, like that.”

As mentioned before the government newspapers also normally have to put politics in the front page. Hence, people would have a difficult time appearing on the front page. When asked if they use ordinary people in their reporting a news editor in one of the state owned newspapers says;

“Yes, we run stories like that. About their views on the peace process, of the outcomes of elections, of cost of living and things like that. We have, we carry stories like that. I'm

not... it's not necessarily on page one, we carry it on the appropriate... on the appropriate pages in the newspaper."

To know what the public want

Since I could conclude the journalists have a clear picture of what to cover, I was interested to see how they know what the public want to read. Some of the newspapers had a readers' or editor's column and got some feedback by mail, telephone, fax or e-mail. This seemed to be an important indication on when they did a good job. Still there were few well-reasoned strategies and some of the journalists seemed surprised when getting the question. One journalist said you could see in election times what people want, another journalist had won several prizes from authorities which he took for evidence he was writing interesting articles. An older news editor said it comes from experience and guessing.

Four of the journalists told they know by interacting with other people. It could be by speaking to a stranger on a bus or train not telling you are a journalist. In that way they believed you hear what people are talking about and what they are interested in. A young journalist explains his method;

"... if you go out, if I go by three wheeler or bus I will talk to who is sitting near me and ... 'how are you, I am from...' Not tell him I'm a journalist, we will start a conversation. And I will ask, what do you think about this attack? I don't think that peace talk will start or go correctly; I think the war will start and yes, yes. Then they start to comment, they will tell you. Yes, these people are such... Or someone, maybe someone will blame government, someone will blame LTTE. But you can take something from them, what they are thinking".

A majority of the journalists also discussed with friends and family. A very common answer was also you are a reader yourself, hence naturally you know what people want.

Even if you do not ask people, the fact that people are buying a paper was by many taken as a proof they are doing good. A typical answer could be, like one deputy editor stated; *"They are buying the paper."*

In Lankadeepa and Thinakaran the journalists told me they were carrying out surveys or market research. Though they did not seem to look for new readers, rather target the audience they already have. At Lankadeepa I was told they have a contract with a research institute who provides them with circulation numbers. A journalist explains,

"And after doing the research they are calling the head editorial to a meeting, a conference, and they are publishing the research results about the Lankadeepa and separate one for the Daily Mirror and Sunday Lanka. So that research will help us to take some decisions about the following year. So they are saying that this newspaper is coming up and this newspaper is coming down, and this area is very concerned about this kind of thing, and like that."

At Thinkaran journalists told they right now are doing a survey. They have put a coupon in the newspaper where the readers can write what they think about the newspapers. So far the editor is collecting these coupons and no one knew what will happen after that. According to one journalist, they have run surveys before where people told they were not coming out with the truth. They did not discuss this, just read it and then it was handled over to a different

department. Another reporter told they carried out a survey four years back that revealed that day-to-day subjects like crime and violence is selling.

I think it is interesting that of all my interviewees it was only a journalist at one of the private newspapers who spotlighted the fact the circulation is not going up. Others seemed to be of the opinion as long as circulation is not going down you are doing the right thing. Thus, not really concerned about attracting new readers, rather keeping the ones they have.

Conclusions

The second of my main questions was to see what views the journalists hold of what stories the public wants and needs and I can state they see everything as important, but it is politics above all which is both interesting and important. The public is according to the journalists also interested in gossip, sex and human interest stories though some think you have to think about the consequences.

As mentioned earlier, what the public wants and needs are considered basic reasons for what gets published and not. In perspective of the previous chapter which stressed the journalists' view of what the press ought to do, one could expect this to influence their image of what is a good and a bad story, as well as what is important and not. Though, the result suggests there is a gap between the articles about social problems people need to know about and the politics and gossip they want. Interestingly the public was rarely asked for their opinion. Even though some of the newspapers conduct surveys (on their existing readers) the results disappear somewhere into a market department and are not further discussed in the news room. Still, as long as the circulation is not going down there is a belief you have good quality, which I consider as a clear market-driven approach.

There is a strong preoccupation and focus on politics also when describing a good story as balanced, having impact, being investigative and being exclusive with top sources, it should be about politics. Considering the unstable political situation in the country this may not be surprising. There are incidents which by McManus probably would be described as examples of stories which are considered interesting and important by both of those who have journalistic respectively a market-driven approach. Still I think it is really interesting to see the results in relation to the Norwegian researcher Sigurd Allen. As mentioned, he talks about how commercial values influences news content. In the Western world this results in politics getting less attention while soft news expands. Well, in my interviews with journalists in the main stream press in Sri Lanka, it rather seems to be the opposite. When talking about selling news it is politics above all. As mentioned there is also a comprehension among my interviewees that important news about human rights and poverty (stories people need) do not sell, even though not everyone agree. Personally I do not understand how a column inside the newspaper, which has shown to be popular, could not be on the front page.

There is a concept the public expects political news and also that Tamil and Sinhalese expect different things. Some of the journalists in the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers said you have to be careful about your readership, meaning your own ethnic group since few Sinhalese read Tamil newspapers and vice versa. This could be seen as an example of what Sigurd Allen would call "*The golden mean*" which could be understood as trying to compromise and satisfying everyone to avoid negative response. Allen sees this as a commercial driven journalism rather than what is in the interest of the common good. My opinion is also that there could be a fine line between what is protecting your own ethnic group and what is being sensitive to cultural and religious values.

A common definition of a good story was that it should show things from the ordinary people's perspective and be about them. Burton states media often claim to talk for the people, but rarely let people themselves talk. I believe this is reflected in my interviews. To ask the patients about their perspective is for me a rather given approach when reporting about a hospital strike, but articles like this were by some journalists seen as something "extra", and was given as examples of successful and balanced stories. I tried to understand why this may be and some of the interviewees explained there was no real connection between ordinary people and the subject they were assigned to cover and that there is no tradition within Sri Lankan journalism to use ordinary people in news. Moreover, I was told you can not trust ordinary people and that people have been brainwashed.

The conception of people being brainwashed, as a journalist in one of the state owned newspapers explained, show clearly a conception of market-driven journalism as contributing to what McManus terms an "idiot culture". In opposite a deputy editor in one of the private owned newspapers talked about how young readers mostly are attracted by simpler language and easy presentation. In the deputy editor perspective the newspaper had stuck in the same pattern for the last ten years not following the trends. I believe it is interesting the deputy editor was the only one talking about attracting new readers, since the common comprehension was not to loose the readers you already have.

Finally I was surprised of the fact that five of the journalists within the state owned media could not give an example of a good story from their own newspaper. In the next part I will look closer to why this may be.

Obstacles for working according to the ideal

In my interviews I asked the journalists what they experienced were the biggest problems for them individually in their everyday work as journalists, as well as what they thought were the problems generally in the press in Sri Lanka. Almost all of the times the problems went hand in hand; the problems you face yourself is what you see as the biggest obstacles generally.

I will start with identifying the external factors outside the media organisation (except image of the public which has already received attention in previous section), such as political, economical, sources and cultural values. Technological conditions are also identified as an external factor but were not mentioned by the journalists in my interviews and I will therefore just shortly discuss it in my concluding remarks. I will then look closer to organisational factors and in the end the individual factors of the journalists. The line between the different segments is not always obvious and I then chose the placement I believed best reflected the focus of the answers, like when talking about cultural values.

External

External factors which were said to influence the journalists work were the political agenda, threats, lack of correct information and to some extent pressure from advertisers.

Always a political agenda

One of the main challenges for me as a media student coming from a Western tradition has been to understand the meaning of the world *politicization*. A reporter explained it as something that goes through the whole society, not just journalism. According to him politicisation leads to that people get somewhat helpless and are totally focused on political stories. He was of the opinion Sri Lanka has been taken for “a ride by the politicians”, in which people have become more dependent on politics than religion. He says;

“When a country is politicised, the mindset of the people is changing. They think that the politics is my saviour. So there is nothing more important for them than politics. So, this moral aspects and other things than...other spiritual things become or made to become less important for them.”/.../It’s just this politicisation, because of these, people want to live...and you know, they have to depend on politics to live, so they’re much concerned about their living so then whatever is taking place around them, because there is no other way for them...there is no other alternative. So they are helpless. There is no point in blaming the public for that....”

Even if only two of the reporters actually used the word politicisation for describing the relationship between media and politics, the political connection was mentioned in all interviews. The difference between the journalist’s answer are rather how they choose to handle that situation, to what extent they experience it influence their work.

The strong connection between media and politics is naturally most obvious in the state owned media, which according to the journalists at The Dinamina, Daily News and Thinakaran should communicate the policy of the government, write from the government perspective and protect the government. But the connection was also present in the private press, which is said even by the journalists in the private newspapers to more or less support the parties of the opposition.

My own reflection is that most of the journalists appeared to see the political connection as the status quo, a fact of the reality. As a reporter working in the private press describes it on the question about whether state or private media work best in the public interest;

“I say the private, because...a...the state papers...all they like... propaganda for the government. It just says the price side of the government. Private, even though it’s somewhat aligned to one particular party, it’s still some what neutral, it tries to give the whole picture.”

This attitude also became clear when I asked what role the journalists believed the press should play in times of election, where almost all of the respondents started to tell me which newspaper supported which party, instead of telling which role they think that the press *ought* to have. Shortly concluded is most of the private press for the opposition UNP (United National Party) and the state-media support whoever is in power, for the time being SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party).

One of the reporters at a private paper, with long journalistic experience said the newspapers keep up with their mission to be balanced and independent from political affiliations to about 80 percent. The reporter meant that in a historical perspective things have changed for the better and he thought the press today is much more balanced and independent.

Only few of the journalists seriously questioned the political ties of the mainstream press in Sri Lanka and asked how the situation was in for instance Sweden. A journalist in a government paper did not even want to call herself journalist since she believed true journalism is not politically biased at all, hence in her perspective there was no true journalism in Sri Lanka. I think this is a bit too hard, but still it is notable that it rather seems to be a question of being more or less biased.

Threats

Threats of different kinds are naturally a major problem identified by several journalists, though strongest expressed by the Tamil journalists. According to one of the journalists in the newspaper it could be a necessity to have political contacts and support if you wanted to come out with the real story since there are so many militant groups who could threaten you. As an evidence of this fact the reporter told a story of an article that was published by the editor in The Sunday Leader. The reporter had never been threatened himself but explains;

“...some organisations, local organisations, some organisations depend on some political party. So if you join with them you have to work for that party. Not like that – unbiased! A media organisation should be unbiased. But without political support also you can’t stand. You know, I am telling you a story that there’s a newspaper, which is very fantastic; they are giving more investigating support against the government. Even that newspaper, he challenged personally against the president. Person – directly! President called [mentions a name] him and called that it’s very bad, and this fellow also called [mentions a name] the president, published all the conversation. Even the president, this guy, president, this guy, and all the bad word he published. But until today he is alive, this editor. And until today he is a powerful man.”

In for instance Virakesari they have relatively recently lost a couple of journalists and the threat from different groups are always present, direct or indirect. The journalists I met in the paper believed they could avoid threats by being balanced, and thereby not offend anyone. I was told articles coming in from Jaffna and LTTE were sent by fax without the reporter’s

name, since there are serious threats. Information had also sipped out from the Colombo office, which was also one of the reasons of this security procedure.

Also one journalists working in Sinhala state newspapers got threatened while working in a private newspaper. He reported this to the police but so far no action had been taken.

Lack of correct information

To get the correct information was also seen as a major problem. One journalist saw the lack of a Freedom of Information Bill as a huge problem since it is very difficult to get information from the public sector. Another reporter thought it is a problem to get people to go on record for a statement. The journalist explained that you can have a very important story that you can not publish because people are afraid and do not want to say their name. Also two journalists working in the state media said it could be difficult to get comments, especially from private sources since they do not want to speak to the government newspapers. One journalist in the private media also said people sometimes lie, and when you check the information it is shown that it is not true. Lying sources also seems to be a problem for the Tamil journalists I met, both in private and state media. One reporter explains how it affects her work;

“Then, I wouldn’t go to spot still to collect information. One day, you know what happened, one day there was a murder. Early morning I knew there was a murder, so I don’t know what happened so I called the station and asked what happened, and so he said, they always say, ah, ok, call me in half an hour and I will tell you all the details and then he shut the phone. So I don’t know what to do, here the news editors is pushing me, give the news, give the news, then I dialled again and I ask one person what happened. The fellow gave the news but actually the person killed was a man, he told me a woman.”

A reporter at one of the Tamil newspapers said Tamil journalists are treated like second class journalists, and police and army do not always give the correct information. This was also confirmed by a Tamil journalist in the state media who got help from reporters in the Daily News and Dinamina to check what has actually happened.

Based on advertisement

As mentioned earlier in this thesis newspapers in Sri Lanka mainly are financed by advertisement. When it comes to questions of pressure from the advertisers, a journalist at Sunday Leader explained how they got some trouble since they decided to focus a lot on the work after the tsunami. According to the journalist it is rather a question of taking a positive attitude;

“That’s the thing like those stories on poverty does not sell because that is like the common concept accepted ‘ok, poverty doesn’t sell’. Yes. I would agree... poverty doesn’t sell and after the tsunami we also had a problem like you know there are like issues like advertisers have a problem like we kept on writing so much about the tsunami, like I think like ‘oh my God, we’re such a grom-grom paper’. So we had to say like hey, so many people are like homeless and that’s reality and what you want to say like – time to party? So, those issues do come. But what I feel, what I have seen is that if you committed to a cause, you can do it. As I said I mean, we think of the negative side, why not think about the positive side like ok, this could help increase the circulation instead of thinking like ok, writing about poverty it will not help the circulation. I think that no, we highlight these issues, we bring out social issues and we create social awareness. And like you know, then people would want to know. We create awareness that these are the issues and that will definitely increase circulation. So I suppose you have to adapt that approach.”

Economic pressure from advertisers was mentioned by few, and only in privately owned media. Also concentration of owners was mentioned as a big obstacle; since the private newspapers are depending on their advertisement it is a problem to report negative things about these companies. One editor thought it would help if they were bigger newspapers, like the newspapers in USA. He said that if they take their full responsibility the newspaper can not continue to exist.

Within the organisation

Obstacles within the organisation identified by the journalists were mainly the type of ownership (and what consequences that may have), a tradition of self-censorship, appointment of personnel, community feelings and language barriers, as well as media routines and early deadline.

Ownership - State or private

I asked the journalists which media they thought worked best in the public interest, the private or the state owned. Not surprisingly most of the journalists had biggest faith in their own media organisation, especially within the private newspapers.

Almost everyone working in the private press blamed the state media for publishing propaganda. Three of the private reporters also thought the private newspapers have to be more concerned about the public since they are more dependent on their audience;

“I think always private media is very concerned about the public, because they are depending on the public. So they are earning money from the public. So the state media is not depending on the public. They are depending on the treasury and the finance ministry. So, there are nothing about the people. That’s why, that’s why I think that is the main thing we always have to think about our readership of our some kind of readership so that’s why we always think about the public.”

I confronted the journalists in the state owned newspapers with the statement that they were only doing propaganda. Then some of them said private media are also doing propaganda and it is rather a question of doing the right propaganda. This was for all the view of some of the journalists with long experience in the state press, or some older journalists who had used to work private but since just recently had changed to the state owned newspapers and who generally were more careful in their critics. Since I myself have negative connotations of the word propaganda I was a bit surprised of the statement that propaganda could be defined as something positive. I asked them to elaborate their statements further and a journalist at a state owned newspaper explains;

“State propaganda... You know, no government in the world can run a government without propaganda. That is true propaganda that you let the people know what you are about to do and what your plans are right. Maybe your...But the thing is, I believe, even the propaganda has to be done in a professional manner. This is question about professionalism....”

The journalists in the state owned newspapers, who had accepted the political policy, believed their newspapers are more responsible and reliable. According to them it is possible to lie within private media while state media has to be, as a journalist expressed it “100 percent

correct news”. A deputy editor working in one of the newspapers meant that they had to. Otherwise they could be questioned from higher up. He says;

“Yes, private media is sometimes I can think you take maybe... attack LTTE seven people killed, I can write. It’s not true news, but I can write and publish. Not ask everyone. But I can’t write that news this newspaper. This is a very responsible thing, this newspaper. We won’t publish if it’s not 100 percent correctly news. Sometimes we publishing the wrong news, therefore ask our...our directorial editor can question to me, chairman can question to me, minister of media can question to me, ministry secretary can question to me, government, director of information can question to me. Therefore we can’t publish any news that is not true.”

This illustrates an interesting aspect; the definition of truth as you may not tell the whole truth or give the whole picture, but you does not lie. For me that is what commonly is called a “white lie”.

The more critical journalists, who had troubles accepting the political frame, most of them young and less experienced, thought the government newspapers are mostly working in the interest of the politicians. For them truth meant telling “both sides” of the story, both LTTE and government side. A young journalist working in the state media says;

“They are doing the job that is coming from the political background. That is... highly... that is government. There... [the name of the paper] is a voice of government. That’s the reality. Then how it can be a voice of people? Government in here, I have to say that, normally, generally, government and the people are not the same. There are so many barriers between government and people. And this government is a little bit... little bit better than the other, a bit better.”

Some of the reporters in the state press think the new president is a bit better than before and a reporter compares this president with the former one;

“Now it’s little bit changed. When some big incidents occurred they will lead it, earlier when Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga was president, every day her speech will lead. Take half of the page with a photograph.”

But still they are not able to criticise the government. One journalist explains the policy of the state newspaper. It is not written down but well known by everyone;

“Policy means that we can’t criticise government as a government paper. Now you know, the president is Mahinda Rajapakse, so we have to write about him. We can’t... write about [tells the name of an opposition leader], opposition party leader. So we can’t write about opposition, we have to write about only this party, what they have done to this country, when the president goes out and speech, next day it will be the lead.”

To struggle or not

As understood from the text above, the situation of the state media is very different in comparison with media in for instance Sweden. In the state newspapers I could identify two sides; the ones who are struggling and the ones who are not. If you are struggling you might try to choose somewhat different sources, different angles and try to get in some critical voices in your articles. Some of the journalists believed that they could actually do something

within those frames and that it is possible to criticise depending on how you do it. Others had accepted the limitations and just did a job, not questioning.

State media pays much better than the private media and gives annual bonuses. One journalist who had worked in the state media for a long time said “*I just care about my bread and butter*”. Other journalists I met inside the state media have other reasons for not fighting. One journalist was only there because the working hours were better, which made it possible for him to study in the same time. Another reporter said it is a good lesson and looks good in the CV since Lake House is the oldest media company in Sri Lanka.

Others are fighting well aware of the fact that they may have to leave the company if they step over the line. A young reporter in the state newspaper got inspired to struggle by senior reporters in the editorial. She could see them argue with the editor, but so far they were still in the building. They inspired and supported her. The reporter was frustrated but aware of her competence;

“I’m struggling, but I have to agree their opinion, ah. And now I am thinking one day if I...if I, that means there must be a limit no? Then I, if there going over the limit, I have to go away from this one. I know that reality. I’m struggling, that knowing reality. I know I have to feed my family. I know... as an... that means I have gained, I have a degree and I have enough education background then I know that I can feed my family a... I can feed my family without doing this job. I can find another job, but it is not familiar to me like this. That’s the reality, but I am struggling for the... for the last minute.”

Her way of struggling was working on her features as a “fox”, trying to sneak in critics of the government between the lines that she believed that the public ought to know.

Self-censorship – a suppression or responsibility

A very interesting question when discussing the concept of working in the public interest and the media’s role for democracy is of course which news the newspapers have but decide not to publish. What I have been realizing in my interviews is self-censorship does not necessarily have negative connotations, as it has to me coming from a Swedish context. The word self-censorship came up in half of my interviews, and about half of the journalists viewed self-censorship as a suppression, while the other half saw it as a responsibility of the paper and the journalist.

The latter view was more represented by the news editors and deputy editors, and is clearly shown in the words of a news editor in one of the state newspapers, who says self-censorship is encouraged by the state, and every journalist’s responsibility;

“Self censorship, that is a responsibility of the journalist. He has to... censorship here that is no official censorship imposed. There have been some times to times under other regimes for different reasons, not for the moment. Self censorship is the duty of a responsible journalist. Here not being directed by anybody to have self censorship. It is expected of us. As a newspaper man, as an associate editor, it is our duty to direct our staff on how to report, on what to admit and what to include.”

He said it is both about moving within the frame but also not to cause more problems. Even journalists of The Sunday Leader and the Virakesari pointed out that when it comes to political news the newspapers are for the time being more careful about what they publish.

But self-censorship is not only about politics. When asked on what quality control stages that the news have to pass before it get published, the deputy editor in one of the private newspapers also told how there are cautions about articles on culture and religion. The journalist says;

“First we are thinking about our culture. We are very concerned about the culture. Our newspaper never publishes anything with harm to our culture or our religions. We are very careful about news items writing about religions and culture. So that is the first thing we are looking, about our culture. For example, yesterday, one person came here and he gave some documents of our very old temple. So we have decided not to publish that story because there are no authenticity of the documents. So if we published that story people are not going to worship that temple. It is a problem of the chief priest, so that news item will definitely affect to that temple. So we decided, very recent example, decided not to publish that story, because of the public interest or the general interest. So that is the way we are looking at the news.”

The other side of self-censorship was reporters who said they are suppressed, which was only mentioned by reporters in the state owned newspapers. A journalist in a government paper said he does not believe in the peace and felt he did not get a chance to tell the truth about the killing that is going on. He explains what happens when he writes an article about this;

“This example is paragraph, ok, I start and I write, write, write. I put some ok...oh LTTE attacking the...I put the true one, ok. But editor “no, this is peace trouble” and cut it “peace trouble”, and cut it. Oh, little one. Don’t have a chance, I think government every time try to publish to peace, only the peace. Now not is peace to Sri Lanka, it’s big trouble, every day they are killing soldiers. LTTE only collect the money to...the LTTE is killing civilian peoples, are big trouble.”

A journalist also said it should be up to the public to decide. The journalist explains about an article the editor did not want to publish;

“... which the editor didn’t want to publish it because it might lead to legitimize the LTTE claim, but what I personally feel is that you write it and you let the people decide.”

Appointed without qualification

Some of the journalists in the state media mentioned the problem with the way people get their positions. Not only do some people jump the queue for higher positions, but also a lot of people without journalistic competence are taken into the newspaper. This results in too many people doing the same job, as expressed by some of the journalists.

The fact the management is changed every time the government changed is a well-known fact in Sri Lanka. But the problem my interviewees are referring to are rather favours to people that helped the minister to power, which is handled without influence of the newspaper’s editor. One journalist explains how they earlier had a strong editor that would not let that happen, but since about ten years ago he is retired. The journalist tells how the “flood-gates” opened ten years ago and all unqualified people started coming in;

“They are not at all qualified. They’re all political patronage, I mean. That is the order of the day, right. Of course there were some translators taken in by new methods, exams and all those things for translation work, but others, to give jobs... something like a job bank they come. There are people who not at all, the intake, they can’t understand you know, they are taken in because they are minister’s somebody, somebody, right. The minister

sends in people in the newspaper, the editor will know that people are coming in. They talk to the management and they walk in and they are in./.../...they are not trained, they don't have a proper training program, everything on the job you know. They are just thrown to the field to learn all those things."

The journalist continues to tell there is not much the editor can do about it;

"If the editor is a bit hard on the guys saying they are late or something, he runs to the minister and says "well, he's telling that I'm coming late", so this man takes the phone how silly, how silly I mean to see how these things work. That means that particular deputy minister not the big minister, ok the deputy...he says "He's my man, don't be harsh on him...just you know be soft on him". So what can my editor do (laugh). Right, he has to just...just lay low. Right. And so, we have a lot of staff, but all fellows are not efficient and things like that because of this problem. So, that is the calibre. And their ideas are different, they wanted a job and they came for a job, and they just want to exist because we pay well."

One journalist was surprised and amazed of all the newcomers, saying they are now more than 180 persons but only 30 chairs. Also, he could not see the newspaper getting better. For another journalist this, together with how the jobs got divided, was a major problem in the every-day work. It did not only take energy and time but also made it hard to work. The reporter explained every journalist is given some ministries to cover and sometimes there are incidents where you might have to contact different ministries to get all the information. The journalist illustrated the dilemma by making tea, a very easy thing that you can manage yourself and not something that needs five or ten people – that will only cause trouble.

Community feelings and language barriers

As became clear in the background to my thesis, Sri Lanka is a multiethnic country with a violent past of an ethnic conflict and the situation was at the time of this research getting worse. Therefore I was surprised that so many of the journalists talked about how the media should contribute to understanding between the groups, but only one journalist reflected upon the existence of community feelings inside the editorial.

Also very few saw lack of language knowledge in the newspaper as an actual problem, even though several of the journalists saw the decision of making Sinhala as national language in the 1950s as the starting point of the conflict in Sri Lanka. Of the newspaper I visited language knowledge seemed to lack the most in Sinhala newspapers, thereafter the English press were only a few spoke Tamil but all of them English and Sinhala, while the Tamil journalists many times could speak both Sinhala and English. For example; in Lankadeepa, the private Sinhala newspaper they did not have anyone speaking Tamil, they used to have one but he left for another job. In the private English press they only had one newcomer speaking Tamil. Even though many journalists in the Tamil newspaper knew all three languages they had few if any Sinhalese working in the editorial. Most of them though thought that it was important that the editorial reflected the composition of the society, still they did not think this was a problem in their newspapers.

Only one reporter working in a Sinhala newspaper saw community feelings and colleagues' attitudes as the main problem both for him personally, and for the press in Sri Lanka. He though thought he was standing outside seeing it more from distance. He explains;

“Not the top, everybody here is, I told you that they are coming from this society and they have their communal minds and they have their political affiliations. They are working towards all this. We should work with them and little by little influence them to change.”

He thought it is a problem that the journalists do not understand their role properly and that it is difficult for them to keep their independence since they are afraid of politics, a backwardness of the system. I asked him if they discuss this in the newsroom, but according to him it is news to the organisation;

“Not much, that is the problem. This concept is news to our news organisations. Most of, most of our editors do not discuss about the public service, journalism and those things are news to our newsrooms and editorials.”

Still, the younger journalists I met, the newcomers in the field, often have contacts with reporters of the other newspapers in other languages. It was sometimes friends they met during college or contacts they had established at for instance press conferences. One journalist explained since she comes from the South she did not know any Tamils before she started her studies. Another young journalist who worked in an English newspaper explained how Sinhalese journalists often want to make contact with him since they wanted to discuss the Tamils' view with him.

Media routines

One of my question areas concerned the routines in the journalists' work and I asked them what a normal day could look like. Most of them had their more or less common schedule; checking other newspapers and media channels, calling your contacts, doing your assignments if you have any and come in with the news around two or three o'clock. Of course the routines of the news editors and deputy editors looked different, as a news editor explained it is rather; *“to be on the scene and on the ball, so to speak”*. Here I mainly focus on the reporters.

Most often the news was initiated by invitations, press releases or through the standard contacts. Every reporter was given a special area to cover, which almost always included some ministries or parties. A deputy editor explains how they gather information;

“Hm... story...we have separate reporters for the separate rounds. We have some thirty ministries and thirty cabinet ministers. So we have reporters assigned for each ministry and departments. There are very interesting departments, for example the agriculture department, the police department. The police department is the biggest news... so we have some three or four reporters covering the police departments. And we have separate political rounds, we have three or four reporters covering each main political parties and they are doing political news. And other ministries also they have some sources, secretaries, additional secretaries; sometimes they are not saying their sources. And sometimes they have contacts with senior cabinet ministers and from those sources they are getting their news sources.”

Some of the journalists seemed to have a bit more active approach to get ideas for new stories. One reporter used to get news by talking to the three-wheeler* driver who took him to work every morning. Another reporter used to talk to people on the bus to get ideas what was on.

* Three-wheelers are work as taxi for up to three passengers. In for instance Thailand they are known as *tuk-tuk*.

All news before two o'clock

Throughout my interviews I could conclude that the possibility to come up with own news items and ideas depends a lot on which area you have to cover, how many press conferences “your” ministries have, as well as which newspaper you work at. Generally the reporters I met in the weekly Sunday Leader seemed to be encouraged to come up with own ideas, but they also have a different schedule since they work at a weekly paper. More often the journalists said he or she could come up with articles though in their special area.

For most of the journalists the day started at 10 or 11 and the first deadline was around 2 o'clock. Consequently there were not much time to move around, especially not if you have to use public transport as some of the journalists said they had. This resulted in a hunt for news where everyone is on their chairs, calling their contacts in the ministries and departments asking “what’s up?”. Some were calling the same persons every day and some, like a reporter at one of the state newspapers, said he made hundreds of calls every day which gave him about 50-60 news items. I am a bit sceptical to whether this was actually true. Still this journalist believed in what he called “24 hours journalism”, meaning that he should always be available and he surely called a lot of people.

The consequence of an early deadline was some news does not get published. A reporter explains;

“We have to give all the news, about... before one, one thirty. So it’s very difficult if an incident happen at 12.30 I can’t get the news before 1.30 you know, all the policemen will be at the spot, all the officials are there. So at the police station I will not get the correct information you know. And other thing, in other press, in [mentions the name of the paper] we don’t go to the spot to report.”

The fact that most of the news were taken over the phone was also dissatisfactory to some of the young journalists who in their journalistic education had learned it is important to go to the field. A journalist says;

“Yeah, we learned about daily college of journalism, get the information, get the... get the stories and clarify the news. But a... but...there is doing the telephone, is clarifying in the telephone./.../I tell you I like to cover protest, I like to go to field, get it the facts, talk with society peoples, getting the news. I don’t like get it the telephone, clarifying one side is/.../I will tell telephone journalism is bad. We have high contact, dial the number and clarify the news. We can do it, but I like that... go to the field and get the information, get the fact and write the news.”

Individual

Few of the journalists did at all mention individual obstacles in their work and when they did it was most of the times that it would be good if they spoke better English.

To learn more or not

Few saw poor journalistic knowledge as a problem for themselves, rather of others and for all the local correspondents. Nevertheless some of the reporters said it would be good if they could speak better English. A problem, according to a deputy editor in one of the newspapers, the journalists are not interested to learn more;

“The big problems is the... we, we... the training is a big problem. Our journalists doesn't have a training system, but I think that this institute, which started recently... But none of our journalists have gone there and trained. I don't know why. It's up to the Editor's Guild and Publishers Association to do something. But only newcomers are going to the institute and there are training. After training they are not joining the newspapers.

And the deputy editor comments on the lack of interest to learn English among the editorial;

“I am also not fluent in English, I also can manage, only manage. Because I don't have any English language background so I think that very little bit can speak English or understand English. That is a main problem to us. So that problem we must address but recently our management do some courses in British Council but they are not interested, but we have to push them.”

Few of the journalists working in Sinhala or English newspapers saw the fact they could not speak Tamil as a problem and someone mentioned the spokesmen of LTTE speak English. Only one reporter in the English state newspaper covered the conflict meant that it would be good to also know Tamil, but did not feel that there was enough time to learn.

Conclusions

The third of my main questions was to see what obstacles the journalists' are experiencing when working according to the ideal and I can conclude the journalists saw main problems in the external environment such as the fact there is always a political agenda (mainly journalists at the state owned newspapers), threats (strongly pointed out by Tamil journalists) and lack of correct information (a common problem for all journalists). Cultural influences were not seen as a problem and advertisers rather a minor problem and also only for the private owned press. Problems within the organisations were mainly the policy of the ownership, a strong tradition of self-censorship, appointments of unqualified personnel (the two latter especially in the state owned newspapers), routines like early deadlines and a tradition of “telephone journalism” (pointed out by the newcomers). Only one journalist mentioned community feelings within the news room and few saw lack of language skills as a real problem. Maybe not surprisingly there were few if any individual problems.

As mentioned earlier, both internal and external factors influence the journalism, even though researchers disagree about which are more important than others. I though think especially when talking about state owned media there is an interesting parallel to Yuen Ying Chan's result of the main stream press in Hong Kong; problems with press freedom and self-censorship seemed to be caused by the policy of the owners and the structural weaknesses. The policy was not written down, but everybody knows it and if you do not follow it you have to leave the newspaper.

As mentioned in my theoretical framework, earlier research of journalists within the mainstream press in Sri Lanka, showed the biggest problems were among other things seen as lack of time, personnel and technical equipment (Jansson 2005). Except for the stress over the early deadline, nobody mentioned shortage of personnel as a problem (rather the opposite) or lack of technical equipment. My result is though in line with the fact they highlight almost exclusively structural problems within the society and organisation rather than own attitudes and behaviours.

Thus, I often got a feeling the journalist experienced that she or he was standing outside as a spectator and victim of the structures and not in any way contributing to for instance reinforcing politicisation or biased reporting of the news. Furthermore the interviewees almost never talked about their own personal responsibility. Though I guess that may be typical for most of us. It is naturally easier to be critical about what everyone else is doing. I do believe that the individual is responsible for his or her actions. Still, if all your care about is your “bread and butter” or you were dragged into the editorial by your father, I think a journalistic mission to contribute to democracy is far out of sight. This might seem as a pessimistic statement, and I think it is important to highlight the fact there were journalists with long experience who do believed the journalism is getting more professional. My results also show that there are young journalists ready to fight for a journalism that is better for the society, and they talk about senior reporters who inspire them in their struggle.

An interesting result is also how the journalists I met stressed political restraints much more than economic. Few knew about the circulation number or how much they depended on advertisement. While the editorial and marketing departments are moving together in the Western world, this does not seem to be the case in Sri Lanka. Hence, it is difficult to see the move from political to economic institutions mentioned by researcher such as McManus, Hallin and Mancini.

There seems to be strong political affiliations, a “back-up” which is also by some seen as essential if you want to publish the truth. I believe this is a clear example of what Hallin and Mancini in their Mediterranean or Polarized Model call political clientilism. It becomes obvious when talking about media’s role in elections, where political loyalty seems more important than what may be in the interest of the public. Though I personally can not see how back-up by political parties or appointments of journalistic jobs as favours, could be part of a professional journalism which aims to strengthen democracy. I think the answers of my interviewees is interestingly similar to the situation in Italy or Spain describing how there is a strong ideal of being balanced and neutral, but there are deep rooted partisan traditions.

The situation is complex and the biggest differences seem to be between the private and the state owned newspapers. Roughly speaking, either you are free but earn less money or you follow the political frame and get a better salary. Somewhere between we will find the public, the reason for the newspapers existence, or?

Discussion

My aim with this study has been to *investigate the journalists' image of what role the press should and could have in the Sri Lankan society*. To sum up I can conclude that the journalists generally are of the opinion they have an important role to play, especially to educate and guide people to a better society. There is also an ideal to show on solutions and alternatives as well as acting as a watch-dog. Furthermore they think it is important to work in the public interest (mainly interpreted as working for the whole nation) as well as to take social responsibility (by the majority interpreted as raising awareness about social problems of the society). In that sense they express the same opinions as formulated in the two policies mentioned in this thesis; the Code of Ethics and Media Charter. This is the ideal role the press *should* have in the society, though the reality looks different.

When it comes to what role they *could* have the picture is more scattered. The interpretations and examples of what it means to work in the public interest and to take responsibility, as well as what obstacles they face in their every-day work reveal several problematic aspects if the press ought to work for a democratic process. There are though rather big differences in the approaches and identified problems within the newspapers; The Sunday Leader seems far away from The Dinamina, and vice versa. I think this becomes obvious in my analysis, but what may not be obvious is how it also was reflected in how satisfied the journalists were in their situation. I could almost feel it in the air when walking into the editorials.

Then what can my study say in a wider context, what role should and could the press in Sri Lanka have?

As I said earlier, this study could be seen as also having a normative approach in the sense to discuss how the press ought to work to achieve the ideals. In a normative perspective the press do have a journalistic mission to contribute to democracy. Thus, there is believed to be a close reciprocal relationship between democracy and journalism, as Carey states; "*Without journalism there is no democracy, but without democracy there is no journalism either*" (Carey, in Nord and Strömbäck 2004:16). The fact this is what the press should do and why, are among other things formulated in the policy documents mentioned earlier; the Code of Ethics and Media Charter.

However, a pre-requisite for democracy is also a free and independent press, and vice versa. Though this might be, as my interviews have revealed, a challenge to the press itself and the society of Sri Lanka. I do not believe the press in Sri Lanka could be considered free and independent. If you could not criticise the government, write what might be negative for your advertisers or need political back-up to come out with the truth, how can the press be free and independent? And if the society itself is characterized by what Hallin and Mancini call political clientilism you might question if it is even relevant to talk about the media's contribution to democracy in a country like Sri Lanka. Well, if democracy is interpreted as the participatory model, it might not. Then I could just stop here saying there is no point discussing the role of the press for democracy, since in some aspect there is either a free press or a truly working democracy. Well, I do not think that is a very constructive approach. Also, I do not believe Sri Lanka is alone facing these problems.

Interestingly the question of freedom of expression has been a hot topic even in Scandinavia after the publication of the "Muhammed pictures" in a Danish newspaper (actually five of my interviewees asked what I thought about this). So you could have a full working democracy

and a free and independent press, but then the interesting question is what do you do with it? How do you use this freedom in the best way? Moreover, what is at all the best way? The literature mentioned in my theoretical framework also talks about this “worries for a democratic decline”. So, I agree with Gans when he says; “*It may remain an ideal, but taking it seriously is nonetheless a worthwhile exercise*” (Gans 20003:125).

However, there is a debate going on also in Sri Lanka. Press freedom was also on the agenda in the beginning of May when the annual World Press Freedom Day 2006 was held in Colombo. This year the conference focused on the connection between media and poverty eradication. I had the opportunity to participate one of the days, and I believe the conference showed what I think is one of the weaknesses in the debate - the little focus on *how*. No one really question that you should work in the public interest because it is beneficial to the whole country, but *how* you do this in practise is much more difficult to answer. I think this was also clearly reflected in my interviews. There were a lot of opinions about what you should write about and why you should do it, but few if any talked about *how* you should do it. It also seemed like it was only one of the newspapers who at all had discussions about what the story was thought to contribute with. Generally it was said it should be balanced and correct, but if this is interpreted as using two sources (rather than how) as well as true in the sense you do not lie, but do not tell the whole truth, then I do not think it contributes to a democratic debate.

The British researchers Gunther and Mughan talk about a media effect which has been widely discussed in American literature – framing. That is how the impact of a story depends on in which manner you present it. If you for instance, when writing about poverty and unemployment present it as a problem caused by the individual, the readers also tend to blame the individual rather than by societal factors such as for example politicians or policies held by parties (Gunther and Mughan 2000:18). This points out that it is not only important you highlight social problems, but also *how* you do it.

Another problematic aspect I think this thesis raises, which I think is worth mentioning is the citizen’s right to know, which is also seen as a pre-requisite for democracy. A basic condition to know must be a right to access. For the press in Sri Lanka that seems like a big problem. True, there is a relatively high literacy rate, but as one of the news editors said you also have to define what this mean. The fact about 90 percent can read and write does not necessarily mean they understand everything in the newspapers. The newspapers are also expensive and are mainly targeting urban areas middle and upper classes. As mentioned it did not seem to be any real interest in attracting new readers except for one of the newspapers. This newspaper was also planning to start the first bilingual newspaper (Sinhala and English), which also was meant to target young urban people. When you say the press should empower people to participate in the society, I do not think that mean the already rich and well-informed?

In Sweden it has been shown that social groups who do not usually read the newspaper read the *Metro*. This is a newspaper you can get for free at bus stations and trains in many of the Swedish cities. Metro has expanded and you can today find it in many parts of the world, not only the Western countries. The concept is to shortly give the most recent news bought from news agencies (thereby you do not need many employees) and it is totally financed by advertising. I discussed the “Metro” concept with a Managing Director in one of the private newspapers, though neither he nor the chief editor believed in this idea. They said the newspaper would only be used by poor people as wrapping-paper for their lunch packages. He said one of the other newspapers was on their way to publish a free copy, but he thought this

was a mistake. Well, I think it is an interesting idea which could be worth a try in hope to reach new readers. I also heard about a group who had equipped a three-wheeler with internet access going around in rural villages sending radio. I think this is an interesting idea in the aim of closing an information gap. Paying about 200 Rupees for one hour at an Internet café in Colombo is a lot of money if you earn 4000 Rupees a month.

A huge challenge for the press in Sri Lanka as I see it is the politicisation which had almost resulted in the newspapers being stuck in a political slough. This could be a reflection of the society as a whole, but also a comprehension among the majority of the journalists that politics is important and popular, thus it sells. I think for this to change the whole society must be depoliticised, which does not seem very realistic. Still, I think there is an urgent need for more research about media consumption to see in what way people are using the newspaper and if not, is it only due to lack of time and money or could it be they are not that interested?

A problem I also think my thesis points out is the homogeneous composition and communal feelings in the editorial and the fact that this was not even identified as a problem (except for one journalist). Still most of the journalists when asked about whether they thought it was at all important or not, believed it was (again except for one deputy editor). I question how you could contribute to the understanding between the ethnicities if you do not even meet anyone from other ethnic groups or ever see the problems they are facing. This I think also shows a need for discussions about communal feelings within the newsroom, as pointed out by one of the reporters.

Furthermore, I would like to point out some aspects which have not been part of my aim, but I believe are interesting subjects for further research.

One of the more obvious things I think would be interesting to investigate is the relationship between the journalists and so called non-governmental organisations (NGOs). NGOs are supposed to be representatives of what is commonly called the civic society. If you think you should be a “voice of the voiceless” and write more of the social problems of the society, NGOs could be a natural source. Though, two of the journalists were very critical to the NGOs. One of the journalists working in a state owned newspaper called them the Sinhalese word “kakka”, meaning crow. He thought NGOs were like crows depending on rubbish. In his eyes people who worked for NGOs were “selling the country’s poverty” to earn money to buy nice clothes and luxury cars, and said the editor would never give a chance to these organisations. The other journalist, a deputy editor in a private newspaper thought the NGOs had to learn how to approach the media and not only care about their annual reports.

Another thing that would be interesting is to look upon the press from a gender perspective. At the Guest house I stayed in, I used to read the newspaper The Island and Daily Mirror, two English private newspapers none of them part of my study. I was often amazed of how women were portrayed. Almost every day there were pictures from fashion shows portraying women in small dresses or sometimes bikini. The pictures were often put in at random, many times in the middle of the business pages. In a society where you do not show your shoulders or knees, and swim in clothes instead of bikini, it would be interesting to hear in what way that is public interest or social responsibility, what kind of needs of the society these pictures satisfied and in what way they contribute to gender equality.

Naturally a suggestion to further research is to look upon the conception of public interest and social responsibility within the Television. On the day of the bomb blast in Colombo I was trying to follow the evening news on Television. More than eight hours after the attack, there was not any new information, which I had expected since many hours had passed. The news started with “we report, you decide” flashing past my eyes. This was followed by pictures of two men taken into an ambulance, while a speaker voice shortly told what had happened. Thereafter two press releases, one by the president, and one from SLMM (Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission) were shown in front of the camera and read loud by the reporter. The president was telling people to “remain calm” and media to show responsibility. That was it. Besides that, it was two commercial breaks and “90 second Worldnews”, saying there had been a bomb blast in Egypt (nothing about the reason to it) and that Tom Cruise was in Rome to promote his new film. There was nothing about the bomb attacks going on in the East of Sri Lanka or a statement by LTTE. I felt it was almost impossible to get a picture about what was actually happening and consequently lot of rumours started to spread. Therefore, I believe news reports on Television would be very interesting to investigate further.

To sum up, I ask myself what will happen once Sri Lanka at last gets peace. What will then be the “hot” news? May that day come soon.

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Infomal interview

Ameen Hussein, Tamil representative at Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission.

Appendix 2

Interview guide

BACKGROUND

Age? Gender? Position? Education? Working experience?
About the newspaper – what is the philosophy of this paper/the “mission”?
How is it financed? Ownership? Circulation and so on.

1. NEWS PRODUCTION – *Working routines a normal day*

Gathering

How is information gathered for a story?
Who decide what is going to be in the newspaper and not? How is it done?
Can you take own initiatives?
Do you use “ordinary” people as sources? In which situations?

Selection

How is the election of stories done? By who?
What areas or problems are important to cover? Not important?
What is a good story? What is a bad story?

Presentation

Is there some kind of quality control before the story is published?
How should a story be presented to be read? (Interesting – Informative)
Are there discussions about how to write a story?
Do you read the newspaper? What stories?

What role should the press have in the society?

2. DEFINITION OF THE “PUBLIC INTEREST”

How is the “public interest” defined? What does it mean?
Who is the public? The audience?
Does the newspaper work in the public interest? If yes, in what way? If not, why not?
What stories does the public need? What stories does the public want?
Do different groups have different needs?
How does the journalist know which stories to cover?
Do you do any research of your readers?

3. THE PRESS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Do the media have a responsibility against the public?
Does the newspaper take this responsibility?
Do the public have expectations on the media?

Are there groups that are not represented in the press?
Does the public have possibilities to give feedback?
Are the public's wants and needs discussed in the news room?
Is it important that the composition of the working force at the newspaper reflect the composition of the society as a whole, regarding for instance class, ethnicity, gender etc?

4. MEDIA POWER

What confidence is the public thought to have for the press?
Can mass media contribute to the development? How?
Does mass media have any power? What kind of power?
What role does the newspaper play for the public in times of elections?
Who has most power, the journalist or the politician?
Where does the newspaper stand in the ethnic conflict?

5. OBSTACLES

Ownership:

What form of newspaper work best in the public interest – private or state owned?

Individually:

What are the biggest problems you face in your everyday work?
Are there situations when it is more difficult to work in the public interest?
How can your own reporting be improved?

Generally:

Which are today the biggest problems of the journalism at Sri Lanka?
How far is the ideal from the reality? Is it possible to bridge over the differences?
How is the development of the media reckoned to be in the future?
How would you like to see the development of the media in Sri Lanka?

Appendix 2

Letter from SLPI



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இலங்கை பத்திரிகை ஸ்தாபனம்
Sri Lanka Press Institute

April 04, 2006

Dear Mr. Ranasinghe,

ANNA BOLIN – MASTER STUDENT FROM UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN

Anna Bolin is a Master student at the department of Journalism and Mass Communication, at University of Gothenburg, Sweden and currently she is attached to the Sri Lanka Press Institute as an Intern in order to conduct a research study for her Master Thesis on how journalists in Sri Lanka define the concept of the “public interest.”

Anna will spend eight weeks in Sri Lanka meeting senior newspaper journalists from all three languages.

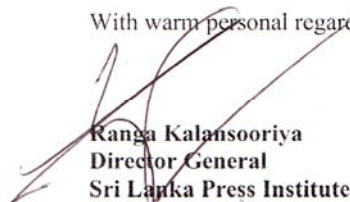
Since she intends to meet some journalists and news editors from your esteemed media institution, I would be grateful if you could grant her an appointment to meet up with you in order to facilitate her research work.

Attached herewith is a brief note by Anna which is self explanatory.

Your assistance in this endeavour will not only help her getting a broader knowledge on the Sri Lankan journalist fraternity, but also producing an invaluable academic research work which would be beneficial to the media industry in Sri Lanka.

Thanking you again,

With warm personal regards,


Ranga Kalansooriya
Director General
Sri Lanka Press Institute

Appendix 3

Personal presentation

Dear Mr.

My name is Anna Bolin and I am a Master student at the department of Journalism and Mass Communication, at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. I will spend seven weeks in Colombo to do research for my Master Thesis about the press in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lanka Press Institute act as my host during this time.



I am contacting you since I am interested in how journalists in Sri Lanka define the concept of the “public interest”, meaning how they look upon what information that the citizens need and want, as well as about media’s power for a democratic progress. Since media is considered to have an important role for development, I am interested to ask journalists how they themselves define their mission and what obstacles or possibilities they face in their everyday work.

I would therefore be very grateful if I could get the opportunity to meet and interview two English-speaking reporters and one news editor (both men and women) at your newspaper. The interviews will be done individually and take about 1 ½ hour each, maximum.

I will do about twenty interviews with as wide selection as possible, and will therefore make interviews with both English, Tamil and Sinhalese news papers, as well as state owned and privately-owned.

I have been interested in media and democracy for a long time and am happy to get the opportunity to get knowledge about the media situation in a interesting country as Sri Lanka.

I will give you a call shortly after you received this letter with hopes that we can arrange a date that will suit you and your colleagues.

Thank you for your time.

Yours Sincerely,

Anna Bolin
Master student in Media and Communication, Gothenburg University, Sweden.

Appendix 4

Pictures from the newspapers

PRIVATE OWNED PRESS

Lankadeepa (Sinhala) 2006-04-26



Virakesari (Tamil) 2006-04-25



The Sunday Leader (English) 2006-05-07



STATE OWNED PRESS

The Dinamina (Sinhala) 2006-04-29



Thinakaran (Tamil) 2006-04-27



Daily News (English) 2006-04-29

