SRI LANKA

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

2020

Tracking Development of Sustainable Independent Media Around the World

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MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2020

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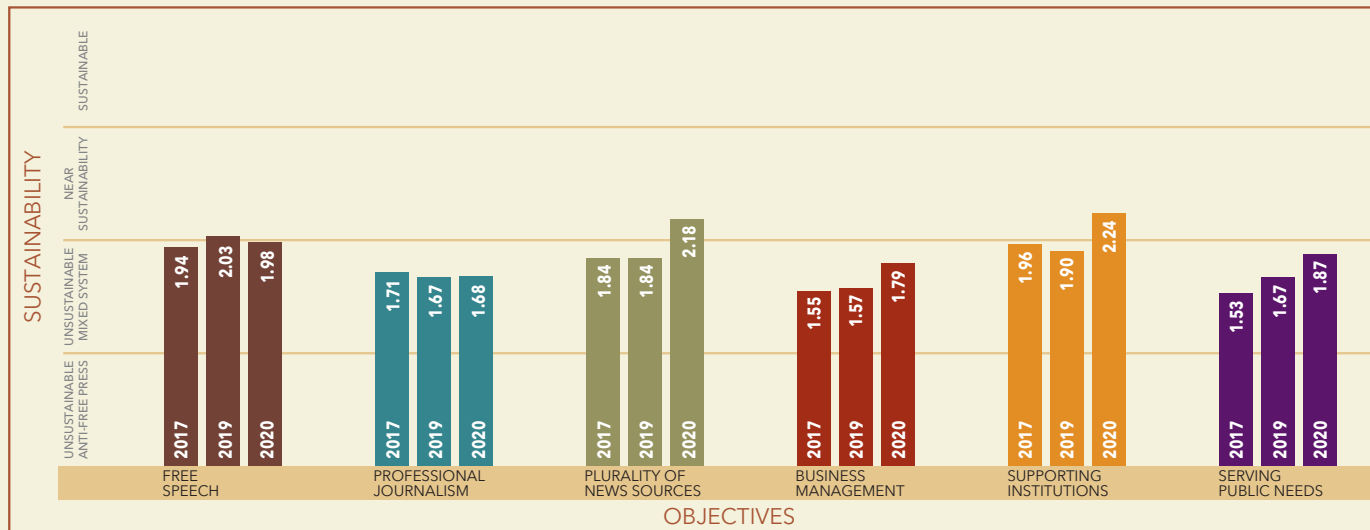
SRI LANKA
AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

► **Population:** 21.67 million
► **Capital city:** Colombo
► **Ethnic groups:** Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil, Sri Lankan Moors, Indian origin Tamils, others
► **Religion (% of population):** Buddhism (70.2%), Hinduism (12.6%), Islam (9.7%), Christianity (7.4%) and Others (0.05%)

► **Languages (% of population):** Sinhala 87%, Tamil 28.5%, English 23.8% (2012 est.)
► **GNI:** $4,040 (per capita) (CBSL, 2019)
► **Literacy rate (average):** 96.3% (CBSL, 2019)
► **President or top authority:** Gotabaya Rajapaksa

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

► **Number of active media outlets:** 20 (daily), 50 (weekly) and 30 (monthly), radio stations: 50, television stations: 20 (Verite Research, Media and Owners Database, 2018)
► **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Newspaper circulation statistics: top five dailies: Lankadeepa (Sinhala): 250,000, Divaina (Sinhala): 156,000, Virakesari (Tamil): 140,000, Ada (Sinhala): 110,000, Daily News (English): 88,000, Island (English): 70,000, Daily Mirror (English): 76,000 (self-reported collected via their Wikipedia entry, 2018)
► **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
► **News agencies:** N/A

► **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** No recent data.
► **Internet Subscribers:** 10.10 million internet users (TRCSL, 2019)
► **Mobile Subscribers:** 31.80 million mobile connections (TRCSL, January 2020)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: SRI LANKA

Bar chart showing SUSTAINABILITY on vertical axis (levels: UNSUSTAINABLE ANTI-FREE PRESS, UNSUSTAINABLE MIXED SYSTEM, NEAR SUSTAINABILITY, SUSTAINABLE) and OBJECTIVES on horizontal axis.

Objective	2017	2019	2020
FREE SPEECH	1.94	2.03	1.98
PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM	1.71	1.67	1.68
PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES	1.84	1.84	2.18
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT	1.55	1.57	1.79
SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS	1.96	1.90	2.24
SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS	1.53	1.67	1.87

SCORE KEY

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

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

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

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

OVERALL SCORE
1.97

Despite the Easter Sunday terrorism attacks and presidential elections, Sri Lanka's overall MSI score increased from 1.80 to 1.97. The Freedom of Speech objective (Objective 1) was the only objective to decrease this year, and panelists had expected it to decrease more significantly due to the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa who was expected to rollback media freedoms. Significant gains were made in Objetive 3 (plurality of news) and Objective 5 (supporting institutions) scores which both moved into the "near sustainable classification. These increases can be attributed to the increase in social and digital media and the positive relationships media cultivate with NGOs and other media support organizations.

The year 2019 was challenging for Sri Lanka, with the Easter Sunday Attacks and the subsequent anti-Muslim riots paralyzing the country and the economy. After the Easter Sunday attacks, the first terrorist attacks on Sri Lankan soil in a decade, it was expected that the media would play a responsible role in reporting on the tragedy and addressing the preceding circumstances. However, many Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panelists believe that after a few days of responsible reporting of relaying government warnings and urging the public to be careful, most media stations decided to capitalize on fear and mistrust to fulfill their commercial and political agendas. After the Easter Sunday attackers were revealed to be Islamic fundamentalists, many media institutions, especially the private media, shifted their tone and fostered a culture of fear and suspicion against Muslims. Many attributed anti-Muslim riots that took place in May 2019 to the media's anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The Easter Sunday attacks led to school closures and economic slowdown in many sectors. Tourism, which was expected to flourish after Lonely Planet made Sri Lanka the top country to travel to in 2019, was severely affected. In 2019 former Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa was also elected president in November 2019. The Easter Sunday attacks, the government's handling of it, and the critical role the media played significantly impacted his landslide victory. The Commissions formed to inquire about the attacks, appointed by former President Maithripala Sirisena and the Parliament, revealed security lapses which led to the attacks, and alienated the Sinhala Buddhist majority. The subsequent mishandling of anti-Muslim riots, carried out by a small group of assailants, made the former administration unpopular among Sri Lanka's minority populations, whose support they depended on for electoral victory. The blanket social media bans imposed by President Sirisena did little to curb hate speech and caused significant losses to businesses that operated on social media. Rajapaksa, on the other hand, promised security and stability, which pro-Rajapaksa media and influencers amplified on social media.

Many MSI panelists with print media ties expressed serious concern over the industry's future. They noted that following the Easter Sunday attacks and the impact on advertising, a significant number of people were laid off, employee benefits were cut, and advertisers have not returned, even though the economy somewhat recovered in late

2019. Although mainstream media, especially print, has faced many disruptions in the last 20 years (i.e., the digitization of content, the spread of social media, and the acceleration of mobile consumption), the panelists believe the current disruption may be unprecedented. Panelists warned that unless media owners analyze the situation and make significant changes, the economic crisis following the Easter Sunday attacks, will exacerbate the print media's decline.

Panelists--including Maneshka Borham, assistant news editor at Sunday Observer; Arjuna Ranawana, editor of EconomyNext; and Vaishnavy Velraj, assistant manager of news at Red FM--claimed that the crisis created by the attacks was not limited to print media. Sri Lanka has more than 50 radio stations and more than 20 television stations. While advertisers have flocked to the leading television and radio stations, other types of outlets have suffered, ensuring an ongoing struggle for Sri Lankan media to stay afloat. In late 2019, smaller print media closed because the cost of imported newsprint spiked and financial backers pulled out. While leading television and radio stations like Derana, Hiru and Sirasa managed to stay afloat, smaller radio and TV stations had to make adjustments to deal with the loss of revenue. The panelists, especially those who work in broadcast media outlets, claimed that several freelancers were removed, allowances were reduced, and subscriptions to international wire services stopped.

There is speculation that many outlets may ax their niche publications. The reduction of revenue would also mean that journalists' salaries would remain unaddressed. However, some web- and social media–based platforms have emerged, catering to different audiences and attempting to provide more in-depth and analytical stories. An expansion of digital media and the fact that several websites have been financially viable could explain the slight increase in the 2020 overall score (1.97) compared to that of 2019 (1.80). The optimism panelists felt about the growing influence of the internet and social media-based platforms could correlate to the fact that journalists have earned additional revenue from freelancing to these sites. A main concern raised by journalists is their low salaries, which often compels them to seek supplementary income. The emergence of digital spaces promotes freedom of expression and offers revenue to journalists; how it will affect the quality of mainstream media content, as journalists also provide stories for these sites, remains to be seen.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

1.98

For decades, freedom of speech has been the main concern for Sri Lankan journalists. Post-independence Sri Lanka had instances where journalists and media were penalized for opposing the incumbent government.

Sri Lanka's constitution guarantees freedom of expression in Article 14 (1) of the chapter on fundamental rights. It says that "every citizen is entitled to freedom of speech and expression, including publication", however, unlike in the United States, free speech is not absolute. Article 15 of the same chapter indicates that free speech ends when "racial and religious harmony are under threat, parliamentary privilege is violated, it is in contempt of court, defamation, or is an incitement to violence." Apart from this, the country also has laws, such as the Public Security Ordinance of 1959, that allow the president to declare a state of emergency at any time "he/she feels that security of the state is at stake." In an emergency, the president gains immense power, including suppression of the media. The Official Secrets Act of 1955 also has the power to curb the disclosure or publication of information deemed necessary for national security purposes. Section 3(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act of 2007, which was passed to guard against speech that incites violence and discrimination, also states that "no person shall ... advocate national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence." In 2016, after a long struggle by journalists and civil society activists, the government introduced the Right to Information Act (RTI)—considered one of the best of its kind in the world by Canadian based

RTI watch-dog Center for Law and Democracy (CLD.)

After Maithripala Sirisena was elected President of Sri Lanka in January 2015, a number of steps were taken to improve press freedom. While many believed that Gotabaya Rajapaksa's ascendancy to the president's office in November 2019 would have a chilling effect on freedom of expression; the MSI 2020's Objective 1 score only decreased slightly to 1.98 from 2019's score of 2.03. However, panelists differed in their views of freedom of expression based on their geographical locations and professions. While academics and civil society activists gave relatively low scores for the Objective 1 indicators, active journalists, for the most part, turned in above-average ratings. Moreover, those from the north and the east were much more skeptical about the existence of these "freedoms" given their exposure to continuous surveillance and harassment from various actors.

Sivasubramanium Raguram, head of the Department of Media Studies at the University of Jaffna, pointed out that journalists and civil society activists in the north continue to face threats and surveillance from defense authorities when they cover stories related to the military. He cited the example of journalists who were allegedly photographed and put under surveillance for covering the Keppapilavu land issue, which revolves around military occupation of residents' private lands, in the Mullaitivu District.

Many panelists noted that hate speech has become a significant challenge. They believe that while there are adequate laws to defend freedom of expression and protect people from speech that incites violence and discrimination, the implementation of these laws is problematic. Examples include the use of ICCPR to imprison writer Shakthika Sathkumara for writing a story that allegedly insulted

Buddhist clergy, as well as a Muslim woman accused of insulting Buddhism by wearing clothes featuring a Buddhist symbol.

Himal Kothalawala, assistant editor of EconomyNext, said that while legislation guaranteeing free speech exists, it is not equally applied to everyone by the government. Michael J.R. David, a former BBC producer and a consultant for film and television at the University of Vocational Technology, echoed that sentiment.

"There are a number of legal frameworks that ensure protection, but they are not properly instrumentalized," David said. David explained that properly ensuring protections is very ad hoc and "that's why there was more freedom to speak under the Ranil Wickremesinghe and Maithripala Sirisena governments, but under a more focused, strict, and dominant government like the one we have now, the space shrinks. Whichever government comes in the US and the UK, free speech is guaranteed by legal, social, and constitutional mechanisms. But because we don't have those, these freedoms fluctuate in Sri Lanka," he said.

Some panelists viewed Rajapaksa's ascension in 2019 as a watershed event in the freedom of speech. While many practicing journalists among the panelists believed that they had not noticed much of a difference in the way people report news, others expressed a sense of general unease about the future.

Sukumar Rockwood, CEO of the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission, noted that there has been a decline in investigative reporting and exposés under the new government. Even without any direct threats by the state against journalists, editors, or media owners, he said the media is obviously self-censoring more since November 2019. Rockwood also pointed to the government's introduction of a Presidential Task Force aimed at

building a secure country and a disciplined, virtuous, and lawful society. While this task force, composed mainly of military officers, has not taken any action so far, its mere establishment had a chilling effect on certain sections of the media. Not only is there a lack of investigative journalism, Rockwood said, but also newspapers are not even carrying stories critical of people in power. "Even those parts are gone now. Almost all newspapers are filled with court stories and statements given by security force heads and politicians. There is no independent political commentary, just recordings of what politicians say," Rockwood added.

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

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.

▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.

▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.

▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.

▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.

▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.

▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.

▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.

▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

While engaging in independent journalism is fraught with risk in any part of the country, journalists who operate in the north and the east have been especially vulnerable to violence and intimidation since the 1980s. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 19 journalists have been killed in Sri Lanka—most in the north and east—by various armed actors since 1992.

Raguram said that the expansion of the space for freedom of expression during the previous government is rapidly shrinking under the Rajapaksa administration. Raguram noted that even during the previous administration, security forces in the north had attempted to intimidate and deter journalists from carrying out their duties and indirectly discouraged people from talking to journalists. However, the effect of the Rajapaksa government seems more chilling. "When someone reports on issues that mainstream media doesn't often tackle, they face trouble. There is monitoring and surveillance. Interventions come indirectly; journalists feel that they are monitored. Journalists in Jaffna are facing that continuously. In some cases, I found that even the institutions and trade unions they belong to came under threat," Raguram said

In addition, Ranawana said that the Rajapaksa administration has given the Ministry of Defense (MoD) authority over part of the media accreditation process—ensuring that a large number of web-based media institutions were denied accreditation or suffered other setbacks.

Ranawana's EconomyNext, for example, reported a significant delay in receiving media accreditation cards for 2019. "Getting a job in media is not a problem, but accreditation is a problem. While the accreditation process was biased throughout, it's harder to get media cards under this government because the defense ministry now must clear everything...My website, EconomyNext, has

been approved by the Media Ministry, but we have not gotten our cards because of the MoD. The future is new media, but only two cards are given out for a website—and we have eight reporters."

As with many sectors in Sri Lanka, Borham added, personal relationships with those in places of power allow journalists to get into places even without accreditation, but this is not a practice to be encouraged.

In addition to this chilling effect on freedom of expression, Raguram pointed out practical inefficiencies when it comes to implementing laws such as the Right to Information (RTI). While the RTI law in Sri Lanka is recognized as one of the best of its kind, there are many serious issues that arise because most of its infrastructure, i.e. offices, are located in Colombo, he noted. Although the civil society and journalism sectors worked for decades to pass the RTI bill, there are still serious gaps in awareness, as well as structural issues that prevent regional journalists from fully using the provisions of the RTI act.

While there are adequate laws to defend freedom of expression and protect people from speech that incites violence and discrimination, the implementation of these laws is problematic.

"The main problem is that the commission is not decentralized. While asking for information can be done online, one has to go to Colombo to appeal. I work a lot on RTI, and I found that citizens, as well as journalists from distant areas, find it impossible to secure the financial resources for this trip. To spend LKR 5000 to 6000 ($27–$33) on a trip to Colombo is out of the question for many," Raguram said. He

added that in most cases, the RTI commission has to translate the documents, which are in English and Sinhala, to Tamil, which is time-consuming and causes Tamil-language journalists lose interest in the RTI. Raguram proposed regional RTI commissions akin to those found in India as a solution.

On the other hand, the RTI has allowed a number of journalists to access information and produce in-depth stories, Ranawana said. Ranawana, a certified journalism trainer who once headed the Sri Lanka College of Journalism (SLCJ), added that he works with a number of young journalists who have been using RTIs effectively and that their stories published in mainstream media outlets, such as *Lankadeepa*, and specialized websites, such as media.lk, have successfully attracted broad attention and created discourse around sensitive issues.

Both Ranawana and Raguram pointed out that while many focus their attention on the attempts made by politicians to intervene and influence journalists and media institutions, the ability of large corporations to dictate editorial content should not be underestimated. While it is well-known that large corporations are able to influence Colombo-based media institutions not to report stories they want to keep in the dark, this practice has now spread to regional media outlets, Raguram said. "In many Jaffna-based newspapers, businesspeople are able to place advertorials that look very much like editorial material to enhance credibility, sometimes managing to sideline real news. Owners and news managers ask journalists not to report on incidents that place companies in a bad light. Most media owners in Jaffna, as well in other parts of the country, have other businesses and business partners. These businesses become impossible to criticize," he said.

Overall, despite worries that freedom of expression would suffer after Gotabaya Rajapaksa's

ascension to power, many panelists did not feel that freedom of expression significantly declined.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.68

The quality and professional standards of Sri Lankan journalism continue to receive low scores, with this year's score, 1.68, just slightly better than the 2019 MSI study (1.67). Rockwood, David, Raguram, and Ranawana said that, in the past, editors attempted to teach journalists that reporting has to be fair, objective, and well sourced. However, such practices are not as prevalent given the increased pace of today's journalism and the fact that some newsrooms, especially in broadcast media, are managed by editors without a strong background in journalism.

As most media institutions are owned by individuals with other businesses or with political affiliations, journalists are often pressured to ignore ethics, Rockwood said. Saman Indrajith, deputy editor at the English daily *The Island*, said that broadcast media outlets are often the worst violators of professional and ethical standards. This is mainly because of a lack of laws governing them, scarce training for broadcast journalists, and absence of societal pressure. "But on the other hand, there are people who have stood up and made changes single-handedly. But the industry struggles to attract such people because entry-level pay is low," Indrajith added.

The chronic underpayment of journalists has always been the source of many ills in the industry, the panelists believe. Inadequate pay affects all aspects of journalism, from professionalism to

corruption. Panelists claimed that while the entry level salary for a journalist in an English-language daily newspaper would earn close to LKR 25,000 ($135) per month, a reporter at a Sinhala or Tamil daily would earn around LKR 15,000 ($81) per month. A news editor or a features editor in an English-language media outlet could earn up LKR 75,000 ($404) per month—slightly higher than Sinhala and Tamil media.

Kanchana Dassanayake, editor-in-chief of the Sinhala-language daily *Ada*, said that media owners need to rethink their hiring and remuneration policies if they want to attract talented and skilled people. Often, Sri Lankan media institutions hire many reporters at minimum wage, Dassanayake said. Because of this, it is impossible to attract competent staff and the low salaries make it easy to corrupt journalists, thus affecting their professionalism. "An entry-level reporter must at least make $328 (LKR 60,000) per month. This will attract capable and knowledgeable individuals...and would also give them a reasonable living standard. Most people who join newspapers are not asking for a lot; most will be happy with a decent wage. Unfortunately, media owners think that filling a newsroom with ten people who get ($164) LKR 30,000 each is better than getting five people who get paid ($328) LKR 60,000 each," he said. Echoing his view, Omar Rajarathnam, a media consultant with International Media Support, added that in his experience, a small group of capable people who are adequately compensated will generate better results.

Lakna Paranamanna, a fact checker at AFP Fact Checking Service, traces the lack of professionalism and the disinterest in fact-checking stories to the demoralizing effect of chronic underpayment. Although fact checking has become an important part of English language journalism

in Sri Lanka, it is often not prioritized by low paid journalists who may be focusing time and energy on securing alternative sources of income rather than verifying the information of their news stories, Paranamanna observed. The salary issue also affects the relationship between the editors and the staff, Dassanayake added. "I know that most editors continuously fight with the management to increase salaries of staff, for the most part unsuccessfully. This, in turn, makes it harder for them to face the staff members, and this creates a gap." Retraining most media personnel and placing them in other jobs while increasing the salaries of those who remain in the industry is the only feasible solution to the salary issue, he believes.

Rajarathnam, also acknowledged that the low salaries are the main reason why the standard of Sri Lankan journalism remains low. Drawing from his own experience working at Lake House a decade ago, Rajarathnam said that a large number of promising journalists leave the industry after a year or two, citing low salaries. He said that donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) that work in media must focus on this issue prior to anything else, as trainings on ethical journalism, fact-checking, and combating disinformation often fail to yield expected results because these are secondary concerns for most media workers who are troubled by financial woes.

Adding to this is the fact that most Sri Lankan journalists do not have strong educational qualifications and professional training in journalism. In this respect, the situation has not changed since the 1970s, when editors thought they were the best teachers, according to Ranawana. "Most of us came to work six days a week, and on the seventh, the editor took a half day to teach us. In most media houses, the senior journalists want to follow that model still—even I do that—but given the current

context, where seniors simply do not have the time, there should be more emphasis on formal education where ethics, sourcing, and other aspects are taught," he said.

Velraj said that the degree to which journalists and news editors follow ethics depends on the media outlet. However, differences exist between various channels/stations within an organization based on the caliber of individuals. Velraj said that she worked for a radio network that had both Sinhala and English stations, and while both were under the same management, there was a more concerted effort to adhere to ethical standards in the English station. Rockwood concurred that English-language newspapers attempt to adhere to certain ethical standards. Ranawana said that while media owners do exert pressure on journalists and editors, there are many instances where a strong and capable senior editor or news director made a noticeable difference.

"Let's look at Hiru TV and Derana TV, the biggest in audience numbers. Derana for a long time has been far more professional, while Hiru was not. Both are owned by people with similar political alignment. The problem with Hiru was that they had a person making crucial decisions who had no news background. Right now, Shehan Baranage is at Hiru and has made a difference. There are people willing to challenge management, and a lot depends on individuals," Ranawana said.

In recent years, the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission managed to convince most newspaper editors to adhere to certain international standards, especially WHO guidelines, with regard to the reporting sexual abuse and suicide. "English-language newspapers adhere to these guidelines fully, but the same can't be said about the [Sinhala- and Tamil-language] press. But even here, things have improved," Rockwood said.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

► Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.

► Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.

► Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.

► Journalists cover key events and issues.

► Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.

► Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.

► Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.

► Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

While newspapers have a code of ethics, private broadcast media do not and are resistant to establishing them on their own volition. For example, attempts made by successive administrations to introduce a voluntary code of conduct for broadcast media failed, as owners have no intention of restricting their own freedoms. This attitude indicates that it is unlikely that private broadcast media outlets would voluntarily come up with a code of conduct on their own, Ranawana said.

State media could be taken to court under their code of conduct passed in Parliament, but nothing can be done to enforce ethics for private media, which is extremely problematic, Ranawana added. Given the track record of outlets like Derana, Hiro, and Sirasa TV, many assume that they manipulate video and audio clips; however, recently Dan TV,

a satellite host, was found to have manipulated an interview with Professor Ratnajeevan Hoole, a member of the election commission. The video was manipulated to show Hoole urging people not to vote for the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) the party that the president represents. Given that Hoole is a member of an independent commission that is in charge of holding elections; such a manipulation could erode people's faith in the commission, Ranawana said.

"When I was the editor of *Daily News*, I had to go to court cases that were filed when someone else was the editor. These court processes, which often don't produce results, are in a way a deterrence—but the private broadcast media do whatever they want. This is a problem," he added.

Velraj also stated that she has been in institutions where ethics were completely disregarded. However, the more established outlets she worked for tried to maintain a degree of professionalism. Meanwhile, Rockwood stated that the inability of impartial institutions to take action against those who violate media ethics has been a serious problem. While newspapers have a code of ethics, broadcast media does not, he said. "For the most part, English-language newspapers try to adhere to ethics codes. There is a general degradation of ethics in society, and journalists can't escape this," he added.

"At times, we are asked to leave out details that might anger those in power," Velraj said.

Many panelists also see self-censorship as a serious problem. Mohamed Fairooz, editor of *Vidivelli*, a Tamil-language national daily published by Express Newspapers, said that while journalists often tend to be fearless, editors tend to be more

cautious. Fairooz added that editors ask journalists to refrain from reporting news items that could be used, rightly or wrongly, in a defamation lawsuit against their media organization. Velraj, meanwhile, noted that censorship is not only avoiding a topic but also reporting it in such a way that facts seen as undermining the owner's interests are left out. "At times, we are asked to leave out details that might anger those in power," she said.

Panelists believe that individual journalists attempt to report fairly and adhere to minimal ethical standards. However, media owners' agendas often override journalists' decisions and influence news reporting.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS 2.18

Citizens need information to become responsible participants in democratic societies, and media plurality is important for democracy because it helps people understand the complexity of issues. There is wide acceptance that the ability to access high-quality news, opinion, and analysis from different sources, as opposed to allowing a few media moguls to exercise undue power and influence over the political agenda, is vital for public interest.

While the panelists acknowledged that Sri Lanka has failed in both of these aspects, they also expressed the belief that things in general were improving because of digital media. This optimism is reflected by improvement in the score (2.18) for Objective 3, compared to the 2019 MSI study (1.84.)

Some respondents, including Indrajith, felt that digital media can help to address this gap in

the plurality of media content. Pointing out that the Internet and social media have transformed news consumption and engagement in democratic debate, Indrajith observed that the popularity of social and digital media has compelled mainstream media to pay attention to issues that they might otherwise ignore.

Fairooz said that a significant number of grassroots activists and citizen journalists have started to use tools such as Facebook Live to socialize issues that are given little attention by Colombo-based media. "For example, there is unease in the Eastern province about the appointment of a committee to protect archaeo-logical heritage. Many believe that this committee has been appointed to dispossess people, and there have been protests, but Colombo-based media have ignored them. Local journalists have used social media to broadcast these protests and to get public attention," he offered.

However, given Sri Lanka's relatively low Internet penetration and the power that mainstream media still holds, there was a consensus that rapid reforms are needed to ensure media plurality. Ranawana said that while there is a large number of newspapers and television and radio stations, for the most part, they report similar stories from different angles. "For example, if we look at a speech given by a politician, the media institutions will start from a point that suits their agenda. However, there is very little interest in talking to several people with diverse viewpoints and creating a more complete story," Ranawana said.

On the other hand, with the introduction of digital media, all primary media organizations now have websites, as well as SMS alert services, giving more journalists and editors the means to "break the news"—often at the expense of accuracy, depth, and diversity. While 10–15 years ago, editors advised

their reporters to talk to both sides of a news story, given the fast pace of today's journalism, only a few journalists bother to incorporate more than one or two sources when gathering information.

"There is a demand for impartial news. There is a market for objectivity but unfortunately, especially in the broadcast media there seems to be a race to the bottom," Indrajith added.

"Often, there is no time to talk to several people," Velraj said. She added that at times, access to newsmakers is a problem, especially for smaller and lesser-known media outlets. While institutions like Hiru, Derana, and Sirasa have journalists who have close contacts with prominent politicians, smaller stations do not, she said. "I have worked in radio stations across the spectrum, and I know that when I was at smaller stations, it was almost impossible to access some politicians. So even if we wanted to present a balanced story, we were compelled to work with the voice cuts we had," Velraj added.

Panelists roundly criticized the role played by the government media. While the audience numbers have fallen over the years, state media still have great geographical reach; in some parts of the country, they are the only television and radio stations to which people have access, especially the poor. The government runs two television networks: Independent Television Network (ITN) and the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC); a radio network, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC); and a newspaper publishing house called the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), which publishes seven newspapers (both daily and weekly) in the Tamil, Sinhala, and English languages. Although there are laws governing these institutions, they are hardly respected. Thus, state media largely fail to fulfill their duties of filling in the gaps of information not provided by private media institutions. However, most panelists agreed that on certain occasions, state media have shown that they can come up with highly popular programs that cater to niche audiences, and they have the ability to produce public interest programming.

Dassanayake said that right after the ascension of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in 1994, and in the first few months of its yahapalanaya (good governance) regime, there was an attempt to be impartial and allow those with diverse opinions to appear on state media. In addition, access to international news agencies that report on Sri Lanka is, for the most part, unrestricted; even at the height of the war, people tuned in to BBC *Sandeshaya (Sinhala Service)* regardless of political affiliation, Indrajith said. "There is a demand for impartial news. There is a market for objectivity but unfortunately, especially in the broadcast media there seems to be a race to the bottom," he added.

In many countries, especially in Europe, there is an attempt to ensure plurality in the form of market share caps (no one can own more than, say, 25 percent of the newspaper market) or limits on the number of media titles that can be owned (for example, a number of television stations or national newspapers). Specific cross-media ownership limits are sometimes used to prevent the buildup of influence across print, broadcast, and online media. Such rules have two main goals: (1) to ensure that there are a reasonable number of news organizations in a defined market and (2) that no single player is too influential. The concern here is not just about how news is reported but also about how it might be selected, interpreted, or suppressed to support a particular point of view.

While Sri Lankan media has always been owned by a select few, in recent years, a few conglomerates have been dominating the market. For example, Derana Media owns several television channels, radio stations, popular online news sites, and English, Sinhala, and Tamil newspapers. Hiru and Sirasa also own television channels, radio stations, and popular online news sites. It is also the case that newspaper publishing houses are not able to obtain a license to start a television station from the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL.) However, the owner of an broadcast media empire can start a newspaper since permits are not required for newspapers. This has allowed Derana, one of the top-two television stations, also to own newspapers.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

▶ **A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.**

▶ **Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.**

▶ **State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.**

▶ **Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.**

▶ **Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.**

▶ **Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.**

▶ **A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.**

▶ **Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.**

Kothalawala said that powerful media owners secure privileged access to government officials and influence policy through the carrot of favorable coverage or the stick of withdrawing support. "Powerful media institutions often depart from normally accepted codes of conduct, fueled by a sense that they are above the law," he said.

While media has tremendous power over the people, a significant number of media consumers are not aware of ownership and thus the implicit biases. While those in the media, like most of the panelists, are aware of who owns the media institutions, for the most part, the general public is still in the dark, according to Dodawatta, member of the Free Media Movement (FMM). While the research and advocacy firm Verite Research compiled a report on media ownership in 2018, this report has been restricted to a segment of the English-speaking community, Dodawatta noted, adding that the audience needs to have a mechanism to know who the media owners are to understand bias in the respective media outlets.

Dassanayake said that almost all private media institutions, especially broadcast media, claim to be unbiased, and that causes confusion among the public. "People need to know who owns the media institution they tune into," he said.

Another frequent complaint was that most mainstream media, which are based in Colombo, do not care enough about what happens outside of Colombo. Moreover, little attention is paid to the issues faced by marginalized communities. Ranawana said that during the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, Muslims were demonized and dehumanized. "When the riots happened there was hardly any coverage. Because these events took place in areas like Chilaw and Kuliyapitiya, mainstream media didn't bother sending staff reporters from Colombo. Often a regional

correspondent, who doesn't have the sensitivity to handle such an incident, is sent there and often the reporting is substandard," he said.

Many panelists, including Fairooz and Raguram, feel that minority voices are not given adequate space in mainstream media coverage. Fairooz said that the Muslim community especially does not feel that their voice is given due place in the Sinhala media, resulting in a distorted picture of the community. The majority of Tamil-speaking people in the country (including Tamils and Muslims), meanwhile, also feel that the Sinhala media do not care for minority concerns, Fairooz added. In the same way, he admitted that the Tamil media do not cover the Sinhala community enough and what little coverage exists has a negative tone. "We are all catering to the sentiments of our readership," he said.

Dassanayake noted that often Sinhala-language publications are unable to allocate resources to cover issues faced by minorities. The shrinking resources that are available to most media outlets, and the language barrier prevents reporters from Sinhala-language publications from visiting areas where most minorities live, he said. Sinhala- and Tamil-language media consumers are not aware of similar issues facing both groups. English newspapers, on the other hand, employ journalists from all ethnic groups and have more diverse audiences; therefore, they are more likely to allocate resources that are needed to report on issues that affect minority communities.

Lasanthi Daskon, the deputy country director for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Sri Lanka, who works with those with disabilities, noted that, apart from language, few outlets cater to the deaf and blind communities. Only the state-run media outlets provide sign language interpreters during their daily news broadcasts,

and no media outlets cater to the visually impaired community.

Overall, the panelists argued that there is little interest in diversifying media content and in catering to diverse audiences primarily because of the lack of will among profit-driven managers. However, given that digital and social media have helped address some of the areas that received low marks in previous studies, the overall score has improved compared to the 2019 report.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.79

Recent digital transformations in the media sector in Sri Lanka, as with the rest of the world, have altered the economic landscape for media outlets as they are experiencing a decline in newspaper circulation and are struggling to develop new revenue streams within digital media. Thus, innovative revenue generating models are as critical for the vitality of business management and independent revenue generation for free media.

As the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks slowed the economy, many businesses suspended advertising or spent less on marketing. This has ensured that the overwhelming majority of advertising revenue is directed toward the handful of highest-ranked media outlets. Given that Sri Lanka has 21 television and 69 radio stations, this means that advertising revenue for most has dried up, creating uncertainty about job security. Noting that many media organizations have cut journalists' salaries, reduced allowances, and are reducing resources available for reporting, many panelists see a bleak future.

Panelists also expressed concern about the future of independent digital media given the steep drop in advertising revenue available and insisted that those who work on media sustainability must immediately look into the matter.

Dassanayake said that the economic crisis of 2019 only accelerated certain trends that mainstream media, especially newspapers, have been dealing with for almost two decades. Newspaper circulation has been stagnant, with youth turning to free online sources for news. Social media, too, acts as a competitor to mainstream media, he said. There are many who question the credibility of mainstream media and would rather believe what their friends share on Facebook, Dassanayake added. "When the economy is a concern, the first thing that companies cut is advertising. After the Easter Sunday attacks, many businesses feared that tourism would not return to normal," he said.

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

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

► Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.

► Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.

► Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.

► Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

► Independent media do not receive government subsidies.

► Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.

► Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

For years, media institutions did not try to diversify their sources of income, Raguram noted. Although many experts on media sustainability had warned of the dangers of not having alternative business models to that of direct advertising, the industry, for the most part, failed to make the necessary adjustments, Raguram said. He added that the overall economy has not expanded in the last decade, which in turn means that only a limited number of companies are large-scale advertisers. "Everyone is competing for those big players. However, there is only a limited amount of advertising revenue to go around, and it has not increased over the years. The question people ask is why media institutions proliferated in the past decade if there are no profits to be made. That's because most media organizations are there to prop up the political ambitions of owners or to have some leverage in society. They are not making a profit, but they keep on going," he said. Dassanayake added that there are many ways for a media institution to earn revenue given the expertise and resources available at media houses. However, media outlets remain bound to an operating structure that has not changed in decades. Dassanayake highlighted that a number of media are struggling financially and unless media owners decide to think outside the box that will not change.

Indrajith said that the cost of printing newspapers has increased over the years, but it is impossible to increase newspaper prices consumers pay without seeing a drop in sales. Thus the dependence on advertising has increased. Kothalawala, who started in print, said that over the last few years, a number of newspapers have folded. "These include papers like *Rivira, The Nation*, and *Lakbima*, which were strong newspapers a few years ago. While government subsidies are important to sustain the struggling industry, changes

do need to happen from the inside to make it truly independent," he said.

Apart from this, Dassanayake noted that the MBC Network, under which television stations such as Sirasa TV (Sinhala) operate, has begun producing Sinhala films to generate additional income to supplement their news stations. Other publishing houses, such as the state-owned Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, run their own commercial printing sections to supplement their income, along with publishing newspapers. Fairooz added that his own company had entered into agreements with *Dina Thanthi*, a newspaper published in southern India to publish a pullout of the latter's paper in the *Virakesari* publication. This has helped the southern Indian Tamil-language paper reach a wider audience in Sri Lanka, and advertising from India or Sri Lanka published in that pullout is shared among the two companies. On the other hand, a lot of diaspora investments have come into Jaffna, and this has given rise to a somewhat vibrant ecosystem, Raguram said. He added that media operations funded by diaspora money had attracted a number of journalists in Jaffna, as they offer better pay and facilities. "For example, a lot of my students are with such publications. They get paid well and get equipment, like a laptop, which would never be offered if they had worked in a traditional Jaffna-based media institution," he said, "But many of them do not have a sustainable business plan to keep it going once the funding dries up."

While the digital sphere offers opportunities, many Sri Lankan news websites have failed to attract advertising. This trend, which is prevalent all over the world, means that web-based media institutions are even more vulnerable to economic downturns.

Dassanayake added that a handful of advertising and buying agencies have a lot of power

in deciding which outlets receive advertising. On the other hand, the government also exerts significant power over private media, because it is by far the largest advertiser. Being in the good graces of government ministries, such as finance and power, as well as entities such as Ceylon Electricity Board and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, have also become important, and sporadically, the government warns that it might cut advertising to private media outlets. "Often, this creates panic, and we make a lot of attempts to ensure that this doesn't happen," Indrajith said.

"When the economy is a concern, the first thing that companies cut is advertising. After the Easter Sunday attacks, many businesses feared that tourism would not return to normal," Dassanayake said.

While nearly all stakeholders recognized the importance of market research, few organizations conduct research. At times, even the insights gathered from the research conducted is not used when formulating strategies. "I have been in institutions that spent a lot of money on market research. After the research was done, the management would have meetings with us where we also provided input. However, a few weeks later, they would decide to implement strategies not supported by research or our feedback," Borham said.

While several institutions publish broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics, many panelists view them skeptically. Ranawana mentioned that this phenomenon exists in other parts of the world too, referring to his time with Canada's top broadcaster. Institutional investigations proved that there were biases in sampling that were

meant to be random. "So, this is always there. One of the frequent complaints I have heard in Sri Lanka is that most of our ratings are self-reporting and often exaggerated," he said.

The panelists, for the most part, believe that Sri Lankan media is entering one of the toughest economic periods in decades. Dwindling advertising revenue because of the economic slowdown brought on by the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 and lack of viable alternative sources of income will mean that a number of journalists may lose their jobs or see a reduction in facilities they enjoy. Dassanayake, Indrajith, and Ranawana—senior professionals in print journalism with more than 80 years of experience between them—claim that it is high time that the industry looks at other sources of revenue and that given the resources and talent available, it would not be impossible to achieve sustainability if a change in attitude can be managed.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS 2.24

In 2020, panelists gave a higher score (2.24) for Objective 5 compared to 2019 (1.90.) In fact, this was higher than the rating given in 2017 (1.96.) Still, panelists pointed out that institutions that exist to bolster media—including professional journalists associations, the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, university programs, media policy advocates, NGOs, and international media development organizations—could play a much more proactive role in supporting journalists. While the Rajapaksa administration has generally refrained from reining in independent media so far, there has been

speculation that it could become stricter after the general election in August 2020.

Sri Lanka has several long-standing professional associations that work on protecting the rights of journalists. FMM and the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) are two of the most prominent. SLWJA aims to promote, foster, and protect journalistic activities in the country; to protect freedom of expression; to advise and guide journalists; and to mediate on their behalf. SLWJA is said to have more than 1,200 members. Meanwhile, the Young Journalists Association (YJA) and the Provincial Journalists Association have also been active in recent years. While a significant number of print media journalists are union members, most broadcast media journalists are not unionized. Dodawatta said that the idea of joining unions is often discouraged in private broadcast media institutions. The low participation of broadcast media journalists is a serious problem, especially considering that they are a larger group compared to print media journalists. Kothalawala said that a number of broadcast media institutions have actively discouraged its employees from joining unions or establishing new ones.

Borham, however, was highly critical of these associations, as they have failed to focus on systemic issues that affect journalism. While journalists' organizations come together to protest periodic attacks on journalists or instances of intimidation, they have not applied sustained pressure on either the government or media owners to address fundamental problems, she said. "I am glad we have them, but they really need to be more focused. There are serious systematic issues in journalism, the biggest ones being education and low pay, and these are the things that need to be addressed," Borham offered.

Rockwood, on the other hand, expressed a much more positive view of media associations. He noted that there are 35 recognized media associations, 17 of which are national, and that each was set up for a specific purpose. He added that a number of unions, like the Federation of Media Employees' Trade Union (FMETU), have been working to promote the trade union rights of working journalists. "They have been actively involved in fighting for the rights of journalists who face poor working conditions. In addition, the Broadcasters Guild, Producers Union, Jaffna Press Club, Muslim Media Forum, and Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists Alliance are among the many organizations that have been established. Further, each region has its own association for local journalists," Rockwood said.

There are serious systematic issues in journalism, the biggest ones being education and low pay, and these are the things that need to be addressed," Borham offered.

However, Borham admitted that these organizations have done very little to assist journalists who have lost their jobs in recent years, and while some of these organizations profess to enhance the professionalism of journalists, so far, nothing has been done. According to Dodawatta, the biggest challenge unions face is the lack of interest among journalists to unionize.

A journalist who preferred to be anonymous said that while strong unions exist in state media organizations, they are often affiliated with political parties and comprise a large number of noneditorial staff. "We all know that members of a union affiliated with a political party in power at the time forced the editorial staff of the state-run newspapers to print

what they wanted on the front-page after former president Maithripala Sirisena appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister. During the 52-day government, these unions held significant power. While these groups have played a positive role occasionally, one must wonder if they even think of the future of journalism," they said.

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

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.

▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.

▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.

▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.

▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.

▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.

▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

Rajarathnam said that these organizations need to play a bigger role in addressing the most significant issue journalists face: low salaries. Unless this matter is addressed, no amount of money pumped into freedom of expression or mid-career training will meet the professed objectives, he said. In his view, the current salary structures encourage journalists to become corrupt and incentivize the best and the brightest to leave the field, thus attracting the weakest elements. Rajarathnam added, "I joined Lake House in 2011, and for me, it was a dream come true. I knew that the salary was low, but I had accumulated adequate funding from my previous job in banking. But after a year or so, seeing my funds shrink, I realized that I had to leave before I ran out of money. This is the situation: at

this rate, only the children of the privileged would be able to join media."

Another MSI indicator rated universally low by the panelists was "quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist." Ranawana, speaking as a previous leader of the SLCJ, said, initially, the institution attracted significant donor funding and high-quality teaching staff. There was also a strong alumni association that met regularly and provided a platform for young journalists to brainstorm, congregate, and build camaraderie. However, some of those appointed later to helm the association had no journalistic background, and a series of poor decisions led donors to pull out. "They also cut the funding for the alumni association," Ranawana said, "And this ensured that former and present students at the institute were deprived of a chance to interact. Imagine what a strong alumni association could have done? So many students from the SLCJ are now in top posts; they have a wealth of information to share." Ranawana added that apart from SLCJ, the University of Jaffna offers a degree in journalism; otherwise, journalism is mostly taught as a part of the mass communication degree at the Sri Palee Campus, Trincomalee Campus, University of Kelaniya, University of Sri Jayawardenepura, and University of Colombo.

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

Raguram added, "Because I have connections with media, I am able to send students to various organizations. Some even come to Colombo, and I think this is good because they meet people of other ethnicities. They learn Sinhala. But I am not sure whether this can be done in universities where journalism is taught as a part of mass communication. The number of students sitting for the mass communication degree is huge and asking students to find their own internships might not be the best idea. If a student finds a good placement, she will blossom, but what if a student finds an internship at a place where they don't encourage youth?"

Moreover, given the low salaries in the industry, around 95 percent of their students do not take up journalism as a profession, even though they study it. Many opt, instead, to teach because teachers get better pay.

Many panelists said that the law does not place any restrictions on private media to purchase media equipment. Further, while there are no barriers to obtain newsprint or any other resources for newspaper publishers, the interviewees noted that there is a thriving black market in licensing the frequency spectrum for television and radio broadcasters. Commenting on community media, Fairooz said that it was almost impossible for independent parties to establish community radio stations. However, thanks to digital media, a number of concerned citizen journalists have started blogs or social media pages to educate the general public about the issues that have arisen in their communities. The panelists also observed that this trend shows that people increasingly prefer regional news, as national media based in Colombo fail to provide wide coverage of issues around the country.

While there are some positive developments, which helped boost the rating for Objective 5 compared to the 2019 MSI study, the panelists agreed that media trade unions and NGOs must play a more proactive role in protecting journalists from attempts by media owners to further reduce salaries and the workforce.

OBJECTIVE 6: SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS[1]

1.87

Many journalists around the world would justify their work by claiming that it is in the public interest. In fact, it is this notion of public interest that underscores the moral authority of journalism to ask hard questions of people in power, to invade people's privacy, and, at times, to test the limits of ethical practice to discover the truth. Public interest is about what matters to everyone in society; it is about the common good, the general welfare, and the security and well-being of everyone in the community. Therefore, serving the public interest means not simply giving citizens what they want so that they can be entertained.

But does Sri Lankan media, especially broadcast media, care about the public good? Does it serve the needs of the people? Dodawatta said that as media has become increasingly commercialized, it is mainly concerned with protecting business interests and promoting profitability. Serving the people is a distant second or third consideration, he noted. On the other hand, state media, while having the ability to act in ways that purely profit-driven industry cannot, often limit themselves to amplifying state propaganda.

Paranamanna said, for the most part, many

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

media institutions do what they think people want. At times, this comes at the expense of facts, and stereotyping and hate speech are allowed to seep in. Paranamanna also stated that as Easter Sunday attacks unfolded, most media stations, initially, came forward to relay messages from the government. However, even then, there was stereotyping involved.

"This is actually a success story. If you asked me if media promote and facilitate inclusive discussions about local, national, and international issues or whether reporting and discussion in the media support democratic policy making, government transparency, equitable regulatory enforcement, and consumer protection, I would say that some do and some don't," Paranamanna offered.

Professional journalists often tried to filter out fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, but now, any kind of information is allowed to flood in. And many people tend to believe what their friends share on social media," Dassanayake advised.

Dassanayake said that there are some newspapers—such as the *Daily FT*—that provide wide coverage of economic issues. On the other hand, there are digital media sites that broadly cover various issues. "But if you look at electronic [broadcast] media," Dassanayake continued, "very few institutions try to have a meaningful discussion about topics that matter. If you look at a political talk show, there is often representation from all sections, but the discussion itself is superficial, and participants try to one-up each other. That's the incentive structure."

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

SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS INDICATORS:

► The media promote and facilitate inclusive discussions about local, national, and international issues (social, political, economic, etc.) that are important to citizens.

► Reporting and discussion in the media support democratic policymaking, government transparency, equitable regulatory enforcement, and consumer protection.

► News and information provided by the media is relevant to, and informs, the choices and decisions (social, political, economic, etc.) made by citizens.

► Citizens trust that news and information reported by the media accurately reflects reality.

► It is possible for citizens to recognize partisan, editorial, or advertorial content as such.

► Editorial and partisan media content is a constructive part of national dialogue; media refrain from including "hate speech" content.

► The media expose citizens to multiple viewpoints and experiences of citizens from various social, political, regional, gender, ethnic, religious, confessional, etc., groups.

Daskon said that the coverage of people with disabilities is limited to Colombo-centric advocates, and one rarely sees the participation of those really affected by disability. "This is the same with every issue. You see the same people talking about things superficially, and at the end of the day, I don't think anyone is the wiser," she said.

Dassanayake said that in the last decade, the people's faith in media has eroded mainly because of the popularity of social media. While there are some positives in this, a skeptical attitude is important to get at the truth, and the complete

removal of gatekeepers has flooded society with fake news, disinformation, and misinformation.

"For the most part, gatekeepers played a positive role. Professional journalists often tried to filter out fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, but now, any kind of information is allowed to flood in. And many people tend to believe what their friends share on social media," Dassanayake advised.

The skepticism of media is not, for the most part, because of an improvement in media literacy, Kothalawala observed. People often select a media institution that reflects their personal views. Kothalawala noted, "They believe that this particular channel is unbiased, while other channels that promote different views are often called biased. This, in fact, is human nature."

While there are many media institutions that expose citizens to varied viewpoints and experiences from diverse social, political, regional, gender, ethnic, and religious groups, the public often seems to ignore them, preferring to stick to the familiar and the comforting. Kothalawala said that the challenge before journalists is to find creative ways of reaching out to people who cling to the familiar and expose them to truths that they do not want to see.

List of Panel Participants

Maneshka Borham, assistant news editor, Sunday Observer, Nugegoda

Arjuna Ranawana, editor of EconomyNext, Colombo

Vaishnavy Velraj, assistant manager of news at Red FM, Wattala

Himal Kothalawala, assistant editor, EconomyNext, Colombo

Michael J.R. David, consultant, University of Vocational Technology, Nugegoda

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

Sivasubramanium Raguram, senior lecturer media studies, University of Jaffna, Jaffna

Saman Indrajith, deputy editor, The Island, Hokandara

Kanchana Dassanayake, editor-in-chief, Ada, Colombo

Omar Rajarathnam, media consultant, International Media Support, Colombo

Lakna Paranamanna, fact checker, AFP Fact Checking Service, Colombo

Mohamed Fairooz, editor, Vidivelli, Batticaloa

Chandrasekara Dodawatta, Member, Free Media Movement Srilanka, Colombo

Lasanthi Daskon, deputy country director, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

Moderator & Author

Rathindra Kuruwita, Journalist

METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

2. Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

3. Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable, objective news.

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

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

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

Scoring: A Local Perspective

The primary source of information is a panel of local experts that IREX assembles in each country to serve as panelists. These experts are drawn from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, and academic institutions. Panelists may be editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers. Additionally, panels comprise the various types of media represented in a country. The panels also include representatives from the capital city and other geographic regions, and they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants are included on the following year's panel. IREX identifies and works with a local or regional organization or individual to oversee the process.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I. Objectives and Indicators

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

Objective #2: Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

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

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

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

► Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.

► Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.

► Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.

► Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.

► State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.

► Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.

► Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.

► Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.

► Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

► Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.

► Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.

► Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.

► Journalists cover key events and issues.

► Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.

► Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.

► Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.

► Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

► A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.

► Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.

► State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.

► Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.

► Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.

► Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.

► A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

► Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

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

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

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

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

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

► Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.

► Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.

► Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.

► Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

► Independent media do not receive government subsidies.

► Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.

► Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

► Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.

► Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.

► Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.

► Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.

► Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.

► Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.

► Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

► Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

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

SERVING PUBLIC NEEDS INDICATORS:

► The media promote and facilitate inclusive discussions about local, national, and international issues (social, political, economic, etc.) that are important to citizens.

► Reporting and discussion in the media support democratic policymaking, government transparency, equitable regulatory enforcement, and consumer protection.

► News and information provided by the media is relevant to, and informs, the choices and decisions (social, political, economic, etc.) made by citizens.

► Citizens trust that news and information reported by the media accurately reflects reality.

► It is possible for citizens to recognize partisan, editorial, or advertorial content as such.

► Editorial and partisan media content is a constructive part of national dialogue; media refrain from including "hate speech" content.

► The media expose citizens to multiple viewpoints and experiences of citizens from various social, political, regional, gender, ethnic, religious, confessional, etc., groups.

II. Scoring System

A. Indicator Scoring

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

0 = Country does not meet the indicator; government or social forces may actively oppose its implementation.

1 = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not actively oppose its implementation, but business environment may not support it and government or profession do not fully and actively support change.

2 = Country has begun to meet many aspects of the indicator, but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces.

3 = Country meets most aspects of the indicator; implementation of the indicator has occurred over several years and/or through changes in government, indicating likely sustainability.

4 = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; implementation has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion, and/or changing social conventions.

B. Objective and Overall Scoring

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

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

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

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

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