Media in Sri Lanka

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For over three years, I have discussed media and conflict resolution at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS) in Colombo in classes with high-ranking officers in active service from the intelligence community, Police, Army, Navy and Air Force as well as staff from NGOs, university students and ordinary citizens. My fundamental emphasis in these classes was to suggest that all citizens in Sri Lanka today own or have access to tools and technologies that allow them to produce, disseminate and consume news and information beyond traditional media coverage. Few disagreed with this thesis.

This is not a technocratic argument, or one based on and reflective of some privileged social or political class, an elite not unlike those who control the media we consume today. We already see how mobiles have changed the way we get and transmit news – from tsunami warnings and road closures to the latest cricket scores. As research by the Colombo based telecommunications policy think tank Lirneasia highlighted recently, there are already more phones in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Thailand than radios at the bottom of the pyramid (BOP) - the largest and poorest socio-economic group in these countries. In Sri Lanka, over 70% of BOP households have a telephone, either fixed or as is increasingly the case, mobile. We are looking at what I call an addressable humanity in less than a decade. Everyone, wherever they are, will own or have access to a number that connects them to the rest of the world. In many cases, this will be a mobile phone. Think about it – affordable, ubiquitous voice and data connectivity for everyone. How will the use of and access to communications at this scale impact human rights and governance? Will this level of borderless addressability realise Francis Fukuyama's end of the nation-state, or conversely, will it strengthen movements for internal self-determination? Do we embrace this future or do we seek to violently stymie its realisation? Essentially, why are these developments and questions so important for professional journalism?

One reason is because these new tools and technologies are re-organising the power around, the perception of and respect towards traditional media. Strip away all the highfalutin hype and well-known pitfalls over the practice of citizen journalism and examples of new media and you still have historic changes in content creation, by and for citizens, unprecedented since Gutenberg's movable type 560 years ago. This is not content that necessarily needs, or uses, the enabling architecture of traditional media to get read, seen or heard. And this is precisely what bothers our senior journalists. As renowned BBC journalist Nik Gowing recently noted in *The Guardian*,

> Too often, the knee-jerk institutional response continues to be one of denial as if this new broader, fragmented, redefined media landscape does not exist. Yet within minutes the new, almost infinite media dynamic of images, video, texts and social media mean the public rapidly has vivid, accurate impressions of what is unravelling. Overall, the time lines of their institutional power and the new media realities are increasingly out of sync. This creates what a few enlightened officials or executives concede is the new fragility of their power in a crisis. **Institutional assumptions of commanding the information high ground in a crisis are from a different era. The instant scrutiny created by the new digital media landscape subverts their effectiveness and leaves reputations more vulnerable than ever in a crisis. It usually does so with breathtaking speed.**

Emphasis mine. For my sins as a scholar, I have been forced to interact with opinionated journalists who are overwhelmingly less knowledgeable about new media than most students I have encountered my classroom, including many from our defence establishment. There is perhaps a simple explanation. Senior journalists, much like our government today, think they alone know the truth and thus over time come to believe their own fiction as fact. As a result, many see no reason to engage with alternative viewpoints and facts emerging from citizen produced content. Readers remain consumers, journalists remain producers and the news flows out from the newsroom. It's a simple worldview. My students, on the other hand, are interested

in ways they can manipulate existing media and create their own. Both groups, perhaps unequally, are fascinated and frustrated by new media. Fascinated because they find that media production for a global audience is now as simple as a few strokes on a mobile device. Frustrated because with this knowledge comes the realisation that it is no longer possible to control information flows opposed to, or that question, one's own opinion.

How does this impact on media production and consumption in Sri Lanka? The re-activation of the Press Council is a good example. The government's decision to reactivate it was ostensibly on the basis that salaries and rent were still being paid to maintain its membership and offices respectively, even though it was dissolved a few years ago. The manic lunacy of the Rajapakse government sadly survived the war. My observation however was that not a single press release or media report on the reactivation of the Press Council acknowledged the elephant in the room – deep and enduring divisions within traditional media in Sri Lanka that undermines media freedom. But we already know this. Just recently, a prominent member of the Editors Guild itself, commenting online, supported the reactivation of the Press Council and bringing to book producers of content that, in this instance, highlighted clear examples of the defamatory use of online sources and plagiarism in a leading newspaper. While media freedom remains under severe threat from government, the defence establishment and armed parastatals, the significance of senior journalists themselves undermining the professionalism, independence and impartiality of their profession is a topic that is simply not talked about openly.

Why is this important for us, the consumers of media? For starters, we now can talk back to journalists and comment on their content, even if they refuse to feature or publish us in their own media. All that really differentiates traditional and new media today is their ability to create or strengthen value. Progressive newspapers like the Guardian in the UK show how value can be added to traditional journalism by engaging readers as participants in news-making through the web. In opening up an investigation into the expenses of UK MPs, the Guardian recently invited readers to categorize 700,000 pages of information, transcribing the handwritten expenses details into an online form and alert the newspaper if any claims merit further investigation. Professional journalists who bring to bear their experience, training and impartiality to investigate claims made by the general public greatly enhance the value of news. This is a participatory culture of news-making radically different to old models of production and consumption.

Value creation also works the other way around. Given the flagrant violation of codes of conduct and ethics drawn up by media organisations and senior journalists in Sri Lanka, citizen themselves will increasingly hold media accountable to a higher standard. In Tamil, Sinhala and English, citizens – from youth to a number of progressive and well-known journalists who blog anonymously – are using new media to produce content that interrogates government, governance, private enterprise and increasingly, traditional media. They are also producing content that reveals war casualties, IDP camp conditions and alternatives to what the government and pliant traditional media would have us believe is the only truth. Senior editors in Sri Lanka may rant and rave about awards won and copies sold, but the hard reality – whether they choose to accept it or not - is that their reputation and integrity competes against and is scrutinised by a media model beyond their control.

How must students of journalism and activists committed to the freedom of expression respond to this new *weltanschauung* of media production and consumption? I would argue for engagement and innovation, but here again we face a significant problem. Many of the institutions, free media movements and colleges of journalism today are hostage to a close association with and coloured by the parochialism, unprofessionalism, essential dishonesty and bias of senior journalists, including many leading Editors and owners of news organisations. This is a systemic problem. How then can we construct a more progressive movement towards professionalism in a context of continuing violence against independent media? Again, I see no other option but mutually strengthening symbiosis – of traditional media embracing the potential of new technologies and citizen journalism embracing the values of professional media as it should be, not as it is.

As I was writing this column, the death of Michael Jackson was first communicated and then confirmed – before AP, CNN and the BBC – via my friends on Facebook. I passed on the message through Twitter and Facebook itself, potentially reaching, through the friends of friends and so on, thousands around the world in a matter of minutes. This is news production today. The visceral video of Neda Soltani dying on the streets of Tehran at the hands of a regime our own government calls a friend is another example. You may have seen this haunting video, shot on a mobile and now online where Neda – a young girl who was not even part of the demonstrations against Ahmadinejad – is shot and locks eyes with the camera as she bleeds to death. How can trained, professional journalists use these same new technologies and methods to help us understand and shape the world we share? How can civic minded citizens create media of their own to cover issues and places traditional media are not interested in, choose to ignore, or cannot cover because of rising costs? These are challenges and questions central to post-war media development in particular and the restoration of democracy in general. A bastion of ageing, and worse, pompous journalists commanding what Nik Gowing calls news regimes from a different era pose a challenge to media freedom equal to the government's censorship and repression.

Conversely, voters unable or unwilling to realise and leverage the potential of mobiles, PCs, the web and Internet to strengthen democracy will get the media and government they deserve.