On the road to peace

Reporting Conflict and Ethnic Diversity:
A research report on good journalism practice in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

As we rush down the slope of hate with gladness
You trip us up like an unnoticed stone,
And just when we are closeted with madness
You interrupt us like a telephone.

W. H. Auden

While the cease-fire still prevails, long-term peace continues to elude Sri Lanka. The country was perilously close to war again in late 2004 when the tsunami struck. With the horror and devastation of the tsunami came a new set of challenges for journalists - telling the many important stories and holding authorities accountable, as the massive reconstruction began.

Experience has taught us that in times of stress, it is critical for communities to have access to the truth and to information that enables them to understand and participate in the decisions affecting them.

Journalists have seen first hand how reporting everyday issues in multi-ethnic communities can either inflame or ease tensions. Violent conflict and political upheaval raise tempers and build barriers to understanding. However, it is not the job of journalists to be cheerleaders for one side or another.

It is our job, through our reporting and through revealing the issues, to help people understand each other's differences — cultural, religious, ethnic and otherwise. This does not mean concealing issues to paper over divisions. It means reporting with an understanding of their complexity.

It means looking beyond and behind the surface for the deeper, fuller story. It means looking for new sources, new ideas and new opportunities to build tolerance.

Through providing an understanding of conflict, its impact on ordinary people, and by exploring possible solutions, there is a better chance of ending tensions.

So what does this mean in practice?

Professionalism:

The first and most important thing we can do is, simply, our job – professionally, accurately and ethically. We have to get the basics right.

Responsibility:

Second, we need to recognise that the free exercise of our craft – exercising our rights and our responsibilities – is critical to maintain a free society in a time of conflict. We exercise these rights on behalf of the communities we serve, and we have an overriding responsibility to report fairly, accurately and honestly.

Solidarity:

The third is to build solidarity and support among journalists.

Solidarity does not mean that all of us must agree politically, or that journalists in different countries, or from different groups, on different papers or rival channels, cannot be in competition. Solidarity is based on a shared understanding of the importance of our craft, a commitment

Buddhika Weerasingha

The separatist war waged since 1983 has been preceded and accompanied by internal upheavals within all communities.

to good will and a recognition that we can disagree on issues without being enemies - that freedom of speech means the right to disagree.

On the most basic level, journalists need to support each other to do their job in safety and to agree, entrench and uphold an ethical code of conduct. Professional journalists, operating to a code of conduct should be 'non-combatants' even in a factional struggle.

The IFJ experience

Journalists have a strong tradition of discussing and debating their role and responsibility in times of conflict, through national unions and organisations, and internationally through the IFJ.

In Sri Lanka, the IFJ has been working with journalists for the past five years as they confront the challenges of journalism in peace and conflict.

In the past 18 months, this has involved an intensive program of research among journalists and editors, monitoring news reporting, and building a network of conflict sensitive journalists and journalism trainers. It has meant developing training resources and hosting roundtables, meetings and training workshops with journalists and editors around the country. The dialogue, debate and experience of more than 300 journalists that have informed this and earlier programs in Sri Lanka form the foundation of this report.

On the most basic level, journalists need to support each other to do their job in safety and to agree, entrench and uphold an ethical code of conduct.

This handbook reflects the views of those who have participated in the research and forums, organised jointly by the IFJ and Sri Lankan organizations, including the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), the Free Media Movement (FMM), the Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU), the Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), the Tamil Media Alliance (SLTMA) and the Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF).

This experience and the resources from the IFJ global program have been invaluable in understanding the challenges and best practices for journalists working in conflict situations. We have drawn on the intensive "Media for Democracy" program in Africa. In particular, the resources on ethnic conflict, reporting diversity and human rights. The complete reference for these publications is listed at the back of this book. They are also available on the IFJ website.

How to use this book

This report presents the findings of the research into journalists' attitudes towards and experiences of reporting conflict. It includes the results of two media monitoring exercises: the first, how the media has covered conflict; the second, how it performed in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami.

The report also contains case studies of conflict reporting that illustrate the role the media has played. This will help journalists and others learn important lessons from real situations about the impact of our reporting, showing us how it can be improved.

Good political leadership should encourage diversity of media, transparency of government, and a spirit of freedom and adventure among journalists.

These case studies have been woven through a discussion of the issues highlighted by the journalists' research. Using this, we have provided a snapshot of the situation now and suggestions for how it can be improved.

This handbook is intended as a practical reference for journalists and includes a series of questions after each section to promote good practice. These discussion points, together with the specific case studies, can help generate discussion within the newsroom or at a media meeting, or can simply be a focus for journalists to reflect on their work and the work of colleagues.

The research that underpins this report builds on an earlier practical handbook prepared by the Centre for Policy Alternatives with support from the Danish International Media Support, *Conflict Sensitive Journalism*. Journalists can also refer to this for practical tips for better conflict journalism. Further readings are listed in the appendix. Most of these resources can be found in English at www.ifj-asia.org

Finally, this handbook may be a useful tool for politicians and media owners, to gain an insight into why journalists take press freedom and editorial independence so seriously, and for an understanding of why good political leadership should encourage diversity of media, transparency of government, and a spirit of freedom and adventure among journalists.

Jacqueline Park
Director, IFJ Asia-Pacific

Conflict & ethnicity – the issues

Divided interests

Conflict is normal during times of change. However, it may become violent when the change is not managed properly and fairly in the interests of all.

Inequality in the distribution of power and resources can pitch different sections of society against each other. They retreat into separate groups – such as ethnic groups — and compete for power and access to scarce resources.

Conflict is likely when communication between ethnic, cultural or religious groups breaks down and past grievances go unresolved.

Members of an ethnic group share a common ancestry, religion, language, history, culture and most importantly, a

Journalists must remember that people
have multiple identities

common sense of identity, a feeling of belonging together.

But journalists must remember that people have multiple identities. They see themselves as an individual, as male or female, as part of a family, as a citizen of the country and perhaps also, as part of an ethnic group. In Sri Lanka, this may be Muslim, Sinhalese or Tamil. The extent to which ethnic identity is emphasised, will depend on an individual's historical, political and social experience and the state of harmony or tension in their region.

The role of journalism

Veteran war correspondent Chris Hedges names the press and the State as chief perpetrators of the myths of war. Journalists, in particular, see their mission as sustaining morale.

"The lie in war is almost always the lie of omission", he says.

Events are given a false significance in mythical war. "We see defeats as signposts on the road to ultimate victory. We demonise our enemy so that our opponent is no longer human. We view ourselves, our people, as the embodiment of absolute goodness. … Each side reduces the other to objects – eventually in the form of corpses." (Hedges, 2002)

Events are given a false significance in mythical war

While it is not the job of journalists to resolve conflict, the media has an important role to play in promoting an honest and pluralistic political debate, and in providing accurate and timely information about issues, policies and strategies that will reduce tension, create the conditions for equitable development and reduce the levels of ignorance and fear that contribute to misunderstanding and hostility in society.

To do this, journalists need to examine the origins and causes of conflict in order to report effectively and make practical suggestions for resolving problems.

The Institute of War and Peace Reporting has defined six duties of journalists reporting in times of conflict.

To understand conflict, how it develops and how resolutions can emerge.

To report fairly, to report the complexities and opinions of all factions and to make our own allegiances, if any, clear to readers and viewers.

To report the background and causes of conflicts, to accurately represent both the legitimate and perceived grievances of all parties, and remind readers, that even perceived grievances are important to perpetuating and resolving conflicts.

To present the human side, to represent their trauma and the human stories of all the conflict's victims in a balanced, professional and non-exploitative manner. This is an obligation both to those people and to our readers.

Journalists need to examine the origins and
causes of conflict in order to report effectively

To report on peace efforts, of those working on peace and reconciliation every bit as much as those who exacerbate the conflict, including seeking out sources outside the primary belligerents.

To recognise our influence and how our reporting will affect the conflict and the lives of people in it. (IWPR)

Truth, peace and objectivity

"Journalists, publishers and editors who constitute the media are not detached from society. They are very much a part of the divisions, rivalries and prejudices that constitute society. Being fully conscious of the powerful role they have, they seek to act in ways that promote the interest of the side they belong to."

Jehan Perera, regular columnist on ethnic issues,
Daily Mirror, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Can a journalist have an agenda for peace and still uphold a commitment to the truth and objectivity?

The real value of objectivity is that it urges journalists not to accept an official statement at face value. It forces more points of view. In the Sri Lankan context, where too many journalists rely on only one official source for their information, the pursuit of balance and more voices in the news is vital.

It is sometimes suggested that journalism guided by objectivity is no guarantee of truth. Particularly when objectivity is pursued by seeking to present a balance of views and leaving it to the reader to decide. The danger according to Melbourne University ethicist, Neil Levy, is that "the indiscriminate pursuit of balance leads not to objectivity, but to outright distortion of the truth." (Levy 2004)

One of the issues is that not all positions are of equal merit, particularly in conflict, and a journalist needs to make an assessment of the relative merits of each position and report them fairly and according to their conscience. For example, if conscripting child soldiers is wrong, as most people recognize, we do not make our reporting fair by giving credibility to those who conscript the children.

This does not, however, offer a license to propagandise. Journalists have a duty, Levy reminds, to minimise their own bias and report in a way that is fair to conflicting points of view.

Journalists' commitment to truth also needs to be reconciled with a commitment to fairness. Simply seeking the views of both sides will not advance the cause of truth by itself. We need to look at how we can take people beyond the official truth, even if it is presented objectively, to an understanding of its real consequence.

We need to look beyond objectivity to how we can push a story, to dig deeper, "to analyse, explain and put the news in context", until it reveals what is true and what is false. Also, objectivity doesn't excuse journalists from throwing issues into the news that aren't already there. (Cunningham, 2004)

On War

Written in the context of a review of journalistic coverage of the Iraq war, the excerpt from the article On War, by New York Times journalist Chris Hedges in the New York Review of Books emphasizes that it's not the political leaders and elites but only those most affected, really understand war. He also highlights how the truth about war emerges often too late.

The vanquished know war. They see through the empty jingoism of those who use the abstract words of glory, honor, and patriotism to mask the cries of the wounded, the senseless killing, war profiteering, and chest-pounding grief. They know the lies the victors often do not acknowledge, the lies covered up in stately war memorials and mythic war narratives, filled with stories of courage and comradeship. They know the lies that permeate the thick, self-important memoirs by amoral statesmen who make wars but do not know war. The vanquished know the essence of war – death. They grasp that war is

necrophilia. They see that war is a state of almost pure sin with its goals of hatred and destruction. They know how war fosters alienation, leads inevitably to nihilism, and is a turning away from the sanctity and preservation of life. All other narratives about war too easily fall prey to the allure and seductiveness of violence, as well as the attraction of the godlike power that comes with the license to kill with impunity.

But the words of the vanquished come later, sometimes long after the war, when grown men and women unpack the suffering they endured as children, what it was like to see their mother or father killed or taken away, or what it was like to lose their homes, their community, their security, and be discarded as human refuse. But by then few listen. The truth about war comes out, but usually too late. We are assured by the war-makers that these stories have no bearing on the glorious violent enterprise the nation is about to inaugurate. And, lapping up the myth of war and its sense of empowerment, we prefer not to look. (Hedges 2004)

The great divide – what journalists think and how they report

The survey results

While there has been much analysis of the role played by media in times of conflict, the majority has focused on the actual coverage. Rarely have analysts asked journalists in any formal way what their experience of the challenges have been, the obstacles they face, any support they have been offered, and most importantly, what resources they feel they need for the practice of professional and ethical journalism.

With its partners in Sri Lanka, the IFJ interviewed 100 journalists about their attitudes and experiences, and asked them for suggestions for improvement.

The research was survey based, with most of the information recorded during face-to-face meetings.

The resulting data provides a unique insight into the conditions journalists in Sri Lanka are working under, the methods they use to gather news, and their experiences of reporting on conflict.

Some of the fundamental problems with the way conflict is currently reported include a lack of access to resources, biased and unreliable sources of information, particularly from the state sector, and language as a barrier to information gathering and to proper representation of other ethnic groups in the media.

Of the 100 journalists who responded to the questionnaires, 88% work in print media, and there was an equal representation of English, Tamil and Sinhalese mediums in the survey responses.

Monitoring the media

To compliment the survey of journalists' opinions, all mainstream daily newspapers were monitored for two weeks from 1 -14 June 2004. At the time, the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) between the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had been in force for more than two years, but peace negotiations had been suspended for more than a year.

Recommencing the peace talks was one of the main concerns at that time. So the monitoring exercise looked at how the peace process and all related issues were covered in 422 news items (132 English, 166 Sinhala and 144 Tamil):

◆ The results showed that coverage of the conflict and the peace process was one sided, inflammatory and often only quoted one source, especially in the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers.

◆ The findings confirmed that the Sinhala and Tamil language press draw on different information sources and deliver different messages to their respective audiences.

The exercise monitored placement, prominence and quality of articles on the peace process and related issues about the recommencement of the peace talks during the monitoring period.

◆ The Tamil press had much greater coverage of the peace process (72 articles). The stories featured on the front page and were generally more positive about the peace process.

◆ The English daily, *The Island* printed 26 stories opposing the peace process compared to 7 pro-peace stories and the Sinhala daily, the *Divaina,* ran 15 stories against and 3 pro.

The Sinhala press focused on the CFA violations of the LTTE, publishing 42 stories compared to only 11 stories on Government military action.

◆ While unnamed police and the military were the main sources in more than 70% of all stories relating to LTTE military activities in the Sinhala and English newspapers, the Tamil media used LTTE or related sources as their main sources when reporting on the violence.

◆ The Sinhala press coverage was generally biased and inflammatory. Seventy-four of the articles appearing in the Sinhala media were found to be either one sided or inflammatory, with only 47 articles reporting more than one opinion.

◆ More than 50% of all articles in the Sinhala media on the conflict and surrounding issues used only one source, named or unnamed.

◆ Political opinions critical of the LTTE were not reported in any of the Tamil newspapers, proving the existence of self-censorship when reporting LTTE news.

◆ The Sinhala press focused on the CFA violations of the LTTE, publishing 42 stories compared to only 11 stories on Government military action

The media monitoring exercise reveals a media divided along ethnic and language lines, and a media that delivers different messages to its respective audiences rather than a balanced, impartial media that informs the public and helps to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Reporting: Our role

The role of the media in Sri Lanka, according to the journalists and editors surveyed, is to inform, to facilitate conflict resolution and to remain objective and neutral.

However, over half of all journalists surveyed feel that the media does not present both sides when covering ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

While this suggests that most journalists in Sri Lanka appreciate the responsibilities of the media, 87% of respondents indicated that the Sri Lankan media are failing to take adequate steps to provide accurate, balanced and fair information about the on-going conflict.

Four in five respondents blamed this shortcoming on the Sri Lankan media's biases toward certain ethnic groups, indicating a significant gap between what is understood to be good journalism and its actual practice.

Getting the story

Both the survey and the media monitoring exercise found that the biggest block for journalists to balanced reporting was sources, primarily sources that are biased and limited and a lack of access to more than one source.

◆ More than one third named the police force as the most common source when covering conflict situations. Other sources included members of the public, politicians, NGO's, armed groups and the military.

◆ The least useful source nominated when covering conflict was the Sri Lankan Department of Information.

◆ More than two thirds of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the limited and biased information provided by state run institutions. And four out of five respondents felt that their sources were not accurate or reliable.

◆ Although 96% of respondents said they try to use at least two sources when preparing conflict reports, more than 50% of published stories monitored used only one source, named or unnamed.

◆ Language barriers, lack of diversity and understanding in the newsroom were the main causes for preventing access to a greater number and variety of sources.

Censorship

It is clear from both the survey and the media monitoring that a clear tradition of censorship remains within the Sri Lankan media, despite three years of the Cease Fire Agreement, and no official censorship.

Insufficient access to information regarding both war and peace has indirectly prevented open coverage of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

It is evident from the media monitoring exercise that the Tamil press self censors opinions critical of the LTTE, that the State controlled media adheres to the ruling political party's line, and that the Sinhala press does not question military authority about war zone reports. This is clear in the lack of a secondary source, once the military has already been quoted.

Codes of Ethics

An important step in improving journalism standards in Sri Lanka is the broad acceptance and institutionalisation of a Sri Lankan code of ethics.

◆ Only half of all journalists were aware of a professional code of practice and less than ten percent of those had a copy or had received training in the code.

◆ Just over half of journalists surveyed were aware that their media institution had accepted the Sri Lankan professional code of practice from the Press Complaints Commission. Of those, only 11% actually had a copy, and even fewer had received related training.

◆ Of the 56% of journalists whose institutions had embraced the code, only one third had incorporated guidelines on reporting on ethnic/religious conflicts, and of those 71% had received training on the code and guidelines.

This suggests that institutions that recognise the specific responsibilities of the Sri Lankan media regarding conflict reporting are also more likely to encourage awareness among their journalists of these responsibilities.

Training

The survey highlighted a need for increased training, education and resource materials for journalists who are reporting ethnic conflict. Almost two thirds of respondents said they had never received any training on conflict reporting and 69% said they were not aware of any educational materials available on reporting religious and ethnic conflict.

How Sri Lankan journalists see themselves

Is the imbalanced and impartial media coverage of the conflict due to bias and misunderstanding amongst journalists themselves?

◆ When asked about the root causes of the conflict in Sri Lanka, 50% of all journalists from all language groups cited

The problems with conflict reporting include a lack of access to resources, biased and unreliable information sources, and language barriers.

ethnic injustice, 30% blamed it on power politics, 14% cited historical misunderstandings and only 6% blamed terrorism.

◆ 94% of journalists said the best way to resolve the conflict in Sri Lanka would be a negotiated political solution.

◆ 53% of journalists saw their role in the conflict as being independent, followed by 24% who saw their role as a human rights defender.

◆ Despite the bias, imbalance and censorship evident in Sri Lankan media, the survey showed that journalists have a desire to work independently, as human rights campaigners, and see the best way to resolve the conflict as through peaceful negotiation.

Given the polarisation of Sri Lankan society along political and ethnic lines, these results give a positive outlook for journalism in Sri Lanka. However, journalists need adequate training and resources, and must be allowed to work according to their conscience, an agreed professional code of conduct, with respect for the important job they do, and the editorial independence to do it.

How to improve

The results of this survey indicate that while the majority of respondents understand the role of the media in Sri Lanka, few believe this role is being fulfilled, or feel they have the resources or know-how to contribute in a professional and ethical way.

Improved reporting would be fostered by :

◆ The implementation of a code of ethics by all media institutions

◆ Increased levels of training

◆ Drafting conflict reporting guidelines

◆ Ensuring greater diversity in the newsroom

◆ Avoiding sensational and inflammatory headlines and language use

The survey reveals that most media coverage of minority groups relates to war and terrorism. This is a reminder of the need for identifying social and cultural issues that can be related to minority ethnic groups. The Tamil people have a rich culture and have produced world-class professionals in many areas – facts such as these, need to be reported urgently so that the perceptions created by the war can be changed.

CASE STUDY: Emphasising ethnicity

Whether a journalist is aware of the code of practice and has received training in reporting ethnic conflict or not, being faced with an actual conflict situation and having to report it quickly, impartially and accurately, will present many challenges.

The following case study is an example of a conflict situation covered by several newspapers. In each case, there was little or no effort made to use relevant or sufficient sources to verify the facts; to adhere to the journalism code of practice; and to report in an impartial and neutral way.

As a direct result of this reporting, the facts and situation were misrepresented, and the conflict was inflamed rather than resolved.

The camp massacre

By Tilak Jayarathna*

The Bindunuwewa massacre at a camp set up to rehabilitate suspected terrorists, took place on 25 October 2000. Twenty-four inmates were killed.

A routine meeting had been held on the evening of 24 October. Some of the detainees were angered by the delay of their release and became violent during the meeting. Later in the evening, they forcibly entered a storeroom and then the police checkpoint, damaging the building with iron bars and other weapons.

The following morning, 700 villagers gathered outside the camp, armed with rods, swords, and axes. The crowd ignored pleas by the police, entered the camp and killed 24 inmates, throwing the dead bodies into the dormitories and setting them alight.

A month and a half later, on December 5, the Lankadipa published the Report of the Human Rights Commission's assessment of what really happened:

"From all the information we have received, it appears that the 60 police officers that were there when the incident occurred, by failing to come forward to prevent the violent acts, are guilty of dereliction of duty. There were no firearms among the crowds gathered. The police personnel who were fully armed not only failed to control the crowd but also failed to take into custody those who were directing the crowd."

However, the headlines, stories and editorials in the days after the atrocity suggested a very different picture:

"25 Die from Fight Between Villagers and Tigers" (Daily News)

"25 Tiger Suspects Killed, 18 Injured" (Island), "25 Die From Attack on Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Camp. Tiger Suspects Take Captain in Charge of Camp Hostage" (Lankadipa)

"Tiger Suspects Slain in Fight with Villagers" (Lakbima)

The facts in the leading English and Sinhala newspapers were not checked, and rather than straight reportage of the event, it took on its own life, independent of the facts. The media constructed its own heroes and villains, with the LTTE detainees, terrorists and Tamil terrorists becoming the villains, and the villagers becoming the heroes.

Even when the President condemned the incident, the ficticious narrative continued to develop, with suggestions that the detainees had made dangerous weapons whilst in the camp, and that the villagers outside had come to protect the rehabilitation camp's officers.

The media failed to say that the villagers had killed the detainees. Instead, it was suggested that the 'LTTE malcontents' had attacked each other and died.

The language used reinforced the ethnic stereotypes. The villagers, army, police and camp officials are portrayed as non-LTTE, peaceful, unarmed, disciplined, loyal, obedient, good, strong, civilized and heroic. And the detainees are LTTE, terrorists, violent, armed, undisciplined, rebellious, conspiratorial, disobedient and savage.

Apart from the Daily News, all other papers delivered fabricated untruths with additions and reductions. The most distorted information was provided by the English daily, The Island, with a headline that stated the cause of the conflict was the Tiger suspects' assault and murder of a soldier serving in the camp. The detainees at the camp had not killed anyone.

Editorials about the event also strengthened the suggestion that the cause of the Bindunuwewa incident was the detainees' protest and their misguided behaviour, that the LTTE organization was behind it, and that they were massacred because of their own unnecessary and unruly actions - as if they got what they deserved.

On 30 October 2000, five days after the incident, all newspapers claimed that the LTTE was guilty:

"Bindunuwewa tumult was a Tiger plan" (Divaina, 30.10.2000)

"LTTE boasts about Bindunuwewa massacre (Lakbima, 30.10.2000)

The Bindunuwewa media coverage strengthened the idea that the different communities in the region were antagonistic towards each other, and that the ordinary members of those groups should fight it out among themselves.

As a direct result of the reporting of the incident, there was the destruction of property, arson, and killing in the region.

* This is an edited and abridged version of a longer case study.

Instability in Sri Lanka – Background to the conflict

By P. Saravanamuttu, Centre for Policy Alternatives

A prevailing situation of No War/No Peace and suspended peace negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tigers), despite a cease fire agreement between them holding for the last three years, characterizes the conflict transformation process in Sri Lanka and highlights the seeming intractability of the challenge of peace in the island. An agreement for post tsunami relief and rebuilding has been the subject of discussions between them for the past three months and is yet to materialize in the face of political opposition from within the government and the predominantly Sinhala south. In the period of open armed conflict –from 1983 until the ceasefire of 2002, with a brief period of ceasefire in 1995 - there has been the armed secessionist threat posed by the LTTE in the northeast and armed insurrection mounted by the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP or Peoples Liberation Front) in the south. The JVP is the coalition partner in the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government opposed to any institutional arrangements with the LTTE. There was external intervention by the predominant regional power, India, in the form of an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987.

The Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE agreed at peace talks in Oslo, in December 2002, to explore a solution along federal lines and based on internal self –determination for the Tamil-speaking people in the northeast of Sri Lanka. The parties announced at the same time that such an agreement would protect the unity of the country and would have to be acceptable to all communities that live in it. This announcement constitutes an acknowledgement that no military solution is possible, that there is an ethnic conflict and that it cannot be resolved within the framework of an unitary state. It records the growing yet grudging acceptance of a federal settlement. Beyond this there has been no indication of the contours of a final negotiated settlement and a national consensus on this continues to prove to be elusive. The reasons for this lie deep in the political structure, institutions and culture as well as history.

Ethnic tension: the parliamentary phase

Tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils regarding their respective positions in an independent Sri Lanka can be traced to 1931, when the island was granted universal adult suffrage. The enduring Tamil fear since then was that their positions of relative advantage in the bureaucracy (gained through educational attainments and colonial policy), would be irretrievably jeopardized by majority Sinhalese rule. The Sinhalese, in turn, were eager to redress this imbalance to reflect their majority status and claim of cultural and religious exclusiveness to Sri Lanka, in contrast with Tamil links to south India.

In the prelude to Sri Lankan independence in 1948, Tamil anxieties were expressed in their demands for parliamentary constituencies to be drawn up on a communal basis. Even though this was not granted, population distribution ensured that the 'first past the post' Westminster-style electoral system would lead to political polarization along ethnic lines, with the majority Sinhalese parties predominating the south and their minority Tamil counterparts in the north. Tamil fears of marginalization at the centre were sustained by the certainty of Sinhalese preponderance in government.

Tamil leaders, nevertheless, committed themselves to the parliamentary process after independence. This strategy exchanged support and participation in government for measures safeguarding minority interests, and attested to the strength of the inter-communal elite consensus on parliamentary democracy and the constitutionalist ethos of the island's independence movement. But political accommodation, although subscribed to in principle, was not fully reflected in practice by government policy. Despite setbacks including disenfranchisement of Up Country Tamils and state aided colonization of Tamil areas by Sinhalese, this consensus survived until it was finally eroded in the 1970s.

The acceptance of political accommodation and parliamentary democracy as the framework for managing societal tensions was under-mined by intra-elite competition, which exploited ethnic populism for partisan advantage. Explicit identification with ethnic populism has come to be regarded as crucial to electoral success, thus legitimizing the older and divisive bases of identity as the ultimate sources of political power, and exposing the inability of the elite consensus to fuse them into a durable national identity. Herein lies the significance of the 1956 election, which was won in the south by the centre-left coalition of Sinhalese populist forces headed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, founder of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and in the Tamil north by the Federal Party (FP), favouring the constitutional arrangement between the two communities implicit in its title.

Once in government, in 1956 Bandaranaike fulfilled his election pledge to make Sinhala the official language, striking at the heart of Tamil fears regarding education and employment. More damaging, his inability to control the Sinhalese Buddhist coalition that had propelled him to power forced him into further positions inimical to ethnic harmony. Consequently, his efforts in 1957 to ameliorate the impact of this language policy on the Tamils, with special provisions for the use of their language and the devolution of power to regional councils in a pact with FP leader Chelvanayagam, were obstructed by the innate chauvinism of the Sinhalese constituency and political opportunism of the United National Party (UNP) opposition. Violent Sinhalese-Tamil riots ensued in 1956 and 1958, the first of their kind in independent Sri Lanka, and were only exceeded in their intensity by the carnage of 1983.

Throughout the next decade, despite the ensuing deterioration in ethnic relations the Tamil leadership continued the practice of parliamentary accommodation. The first government of Bandaranaike's widow, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1960-64), vigorously implemented the official language policy and reneged on promises to reintroduce the devolution proposals envisaged in the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact. With assurances on this score contained in a pact with the UNP, the FP joined the UNP-dominated national government in 1965. While legislation for the use of Tamil was passed, that relating to the devolution of power was not and the FP withdrew from the government in mid-1969.

The 1970s were a crucial decade in that both the SLFP and the UNP won overwhelming parliamentary majorities that enabled them to promulgate constitutions of their own. Both of these (1972 and 1978) contained entrenched provisions regarding the unitary status of the state, Sinhala as the official language and Buddhism, the religion of the majority community, having "foremost place". The 1978 UNP constitution further consolidated the entrenchment of power at the centre through the establishment of an executive presidency.

As political opportunism arising primarily from the dynamics of the UNP/SLFP zero-sum power relationship fed ethnic tension and frustrated attempts at political agreements, armed youth militancy took hold. The first JVP insurgency in the south (1971) is a case in point and in the north, the emergence of armed militant groups amongst the Tamil community saw political initiative and leadership move away from the established political parties. Discriminatory educational policies by the SLFP government (1970-77) and the counter–terror campaign of its UNP successor (1977- 88) in particular, ensured that youth militancy in the northeast would metamorphose into full-blown armed conflict with the Sri Lankan state in the 1980s. By 1976, Tamil political representation in the Vaddukoddai Resolution of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) had espoused secession as a last resort in the face of the failure of the strategy of political accommodation.

The ties that bind – our ethical frameworks

As journalists we make ethical decisions every day. But in times of conflict, the safeguard that our code of ethics provides is vital, because the situation is almost never clear and the different sides usually have a strong interest in pushing their own agenda.

Journalists need to work independently and make decisions on everything from the headline, the people we interview, selection of images, quotes and the language we use, to the most basic decisions of what stories we cover and why.

It is the task of journalists to expose those whose practice and goals are damaging to the profession and to society.

Why journalists need guidelines for reporting in times of conflict

◆ Because we work autonomously

◆ To avoid pressure or influence both within and without news organisations

◆ So we can defend our work within the newsroom and in the community

◆ To help solve ethical problems and dilemmas

It is the task of our journalist colleagues, through the codes of conduct, good practice and other means of self-regulation, to expose those whose practice and goals are damaging to the profession and society.

So while journalists will generally resist outside forces telling them how to do their jobs, this is not always a simple task.

Often the greatest pressures come from within our own media organization. This means journalists can be instructed in a way that contravenes their code of professional conduct, or their work can be subject to drastic editing that damages its integrity.

The best guidelines are not a set of dos and don'ts, but rather a framework for thinking through ethical issues so journalists can confidently address the conflicts confronting them.

Guidelines also give journalists a basis for challenging improper use of that material or distortions added during the editing process, and will help those who direct the work of other journalists.

Finally, guidelines can educate members of the public about how journalists approach their work, and allow journalists to defend their decisions in public.

IFJ Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists

This international Declaration is proclaimed as a standard of professional conduct for journalists engaged in gathering, transmitting, disseminating and commenting on news and information in describing events.

1. Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.

2. In pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at all times defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news, and of the right of fair comment and criticism.

3. The journalist shall report only in accordance with facts of which he/she knows the origin. The journalist shall not suppress essential information or falsify documents.

4. The journalist shall use only fair methods to obtain news, photographs and documents.

5. The journalist shall do the utmost to rectify any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate.

6. The journalist shall observe professional secrecy regarding the source of information obtained in confidence.

7. The journalist shall be aware of the danger of discrimination being furthered by the media, and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discrimination based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national or social origins.

8. The journalist shall regard as grave professional offences the following: plagiarism; * malicious misrepresentation; * calumny, slander, libel, unfounded accusations; * acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.

9. Journalists worthy of the name shall deem it their duty to observe faithfully the principles stated above. Within the general law of each country the journalist shall recognise in professional matters the jurisdiction of colleagues only, to the exclusion of every kind of interference by governments or others.

(Adopted by 1954 World Congress of the IFJ. Amended by the 1986 World Congress.)

Accuracy, rumours and truth tellers

The media has an ethical, moral and professional obligation to provide the public with honest, accurate and reliable reporting that does not deliberately distort or suppress information. It is important for journalism, and for the proper functioning of democracy, that people can trust news media and feel that what they read and view is true, fair and balanced.

One of the key problems faced by journalists reporting on conflicts is how to ensure accuracy at a time when facts are frequently manipulated or censored and various 'truths' compete for currency. The research shows one of the most common causes of inaccuracy is unreliable sources, with state authorities the worst offenders.

Language barriers, and the difficulty of getting accurate information from other language groups, are highlighted as another obstacle to accuracy in reporting.

The Sri Lankan Press Complaints Commission reports the majority of complaints they receive relate to instances of alleged factual inaccuracy.

While it is important to background news reports, journalists need to be clear that a news report is not an editorial, opinion or feature that seeks to promote a point of view. News reports should report all sides. To leave out or add to an event is falsification. When a journalist falsifies news, especially in relation to conflict, trust is undermined and lives could be endangered.

To maintain trust with the public when a report is found to be incorrect, a correction that explains the mistake and the situation must be issued.

The United Nations defines 'hate speech' under Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), General Assembly resolution from 1976, as:

"1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.

2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law."

Accuracy Checklist:

◆ Distinguish between first and second hand sources.

◆ Always use reputable sources, and wherever possible use first hand information.

◆ Cultivate an extensive network of sources that can be called upon to give expert first hand information on issues or events, particularly in other ethnic/language goups

◆ When reporting crime, try to get the suspects' side as well

◆ Ensure names of people and places are spelt accurately

◆ Take steps to correct any errors that have been made

◆ Avoid providing death tolls when verification is difficult

Journalists generally agree that they should not allow themselves to be used to stir up ethnic violence through careless or malicious reporting.

Journalists need to be sensitive and careful in their work but they agree their priority is to report – to be a truth teller to society. To practice self-censorship and not report allows rumour to flourish.

The tension between professional and political commitment was one of the liveliest discussions among Sri Lankan journalists, and there were diverse opinions on whether and how things likely to incite further tension should be reported. Some suggested the priority should be to preserve harmony, while others felt there was an overriding responsibility to report.

Many argue the decision wasn't whether or not to report it, but rather how to report.

CASE STUDY: Missing the issues/counting the toll of misinformation

The following case study illustrates how a single incident was exaggerated, under-reported, and ignored by a variety of publications. In the end, rumour flourished, readers were denied the truth, and further tension was ignited.

In June 2004, two Sinhalese newspapers reported with varying degrees of dramatisation that 75 fighters had died, and over 100 more had been injured in a clash between the Tamil Prabhakaran and Karuna factions in the Thoppigala Jungles.

The headlines included:

"…Prabha's 80 and Karuna's 11 fighters dead during the last 3 days. Pitched battles continued until yesterday evening"

"Heavy fighting between Prabha and Karuna factions to capture Thoppigala. Arul Rajas Camp destroyed. 75 dead and causalities numbering 100"

"Fighting increases among Karuna & Prabhakaran cadres in Thoppigala. Deaths on both sides around 100".

A broadcast news report also reported that over 100 people had been killed.

However, other Sinhala papers either published small news pieces the next day, or like the Colombo based Tamil dailies, didn't report it at all. The Sri Lanka Army and the Eastern Army Commander did not report a clash had taken place. And a LTTE news website claimed the story was made up by the government.

When army authorities finally reported that only eight LTTE cadres were killed as a result of a bomb explosion, the truth became obvious - that the stories were, in fact, made up by the newspapers for their Sinhala readers.

No sources were mentioned in the reports, and none of the media outlets corrected their reports - this not only compromised the media's responsibility of providing the truth, but also citizens' rights to be told the truth. Such journalism practice confuses audiences, destroys trust between the media and public, and leaves them questioning the authenticity of future reports.

More than meets the eye

Truth often comes late to conflict.

Many examples were discussed where clashes had either deliberately been instigated by one side to provide a cover for their own violence, or where the original incident sparking the conflict had nothing to do with either side's ethnicity, but rather economic factors.

A report that reduces these issues to purely "ethnic" events is inaccurate and can have dangerous consequences. The context and background should be exposed by the journalists.

Journalists need to set out to inform in a way that can empower communities, rather than adding to the sense of confusion and hopelessness through bias, prejudice and insensitivity. Without the knowledge and power that comes with information, these communities are easy prey for political manipulation.

Good practice questions:

1. If a political leader regularly makes speeches attacking one racial or ethnic group, are these speeches news?
2. If such a speech is reported, are the allegations it contains subjected to scrutiny and are the people who are attacked given an opportunity for denial and rebuttal?
3. Does your publication withhold reports on ethnic conflict? Could it report better if it gave the facts and context, and questioned those who play the ethnic card for political ends?
4. Is the religion or ethnicity of people accused of crimes always mentioned, or only for those from certain ethnic or religious groups? Does your publication make a habit of naming one ethnic group more than others, when related to crime etc?
5. Do you ever pit one ethnic or minority group against another in your stories, even if the reality was less confrontational or violent, in the knowledge that the story will seem more exciting and a better read?
6. When a report turns out to be wrong, what actions does your organization take to correct it? Does your organization have a policy on issuing corrections? How can you encourage discussion of these ethical issues among journalists in your news room?

Balance Checklist:

◆ Avoid becoming a cheerleader for one side

◆ Establish the different viewpoints and ensure they are presented respectfully and accurately

◆ Bear in mind the context in which these views exist. Are some views held by an extreme majority?

◆ Rather than paraphrase other people's points of view, where possible, quote them directly.

◆ Ask yourself whether the story, as it is written, would harm or aggravate religious, racial or ethnic sensitivities

◆ Be careful not to create a false balance – balance does not mean equal merit to all sides

◆ Remember you are reporting for the whole community, not just your ethnic group

Case study: Choosing words carefully

The following case study shows how prejudice and bias can poison the truth.

The publication raised the ethnic issue above all others, creating division and blame among communities, rather than using context and background to present a balanced representation of the facts. The result was an increase in violence and an unnecessarily volatile situation that was open to further manipulation.

When two Tamil employees died after being shot by police during ethnic riots in Kandapola, the main news item in a Sinhala daily was entitled "Wedi ka nasithi" – "Got themselves shot and killed".

In the clashes that flared up, eighty shops were vandalised, the town shut down for three days, and relations between the Tamils and Sinhalese (in a town with a majority Tamil community) deteriorated.

The phrase "Wedi ka nasithi" – "Got themselves shot and killed" - implies they provoked the shooting. By phrasing it instead as, "Wedi Wadee Nasithi" - "Killed by being shot" – the meaning and inference would have been very different.

Did the editor decide to phrase the front-page headline in such a way, following a proper investigation into the killings? And if the victims had been Sinhala, would the editor have phrased the headline differently?

When covering ethnic clashes, journalists should always ask themselves if their reporting has portrayed all parties in a balanced and fair way. If they fail to do so, their reporting may well incite further violence.

Reports on the Kandapola incident published in the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers were very different.

The Tamil newspapers reported that 52 shops were damaged – thereby implying that more harm was inflicted on the Tamil community.

The Sinhala newspapers implied that the events in Kandapola could largely be blamed on the riot caused by the Tamil estate employees.

In addition, the accident between a three-wheeler and a bus, which all Sinhala newspapers blamed for igniting the clashes, proved in retrospect to be grossly exaggerated.

If truth and respect for the public's right to know is the media's main responsibility, why was there such a variation of events reported to the Sinhala and Tamil people?

Context Checklist:

◆ Research the history of the conflict

◆ Avoid focusing on individual acts of violence and try to paint the broader picture

◆ Examine what each party has to lose or gain

◆ Provide the perspective of the common people who are affected

The ethnic divide

Where there is a dispute or violence, the job of the journalist is to report what happened and to try to find out the cause, but we should not assume that all disputes are ethnically driven.

In October 2002, eight months into the ceasefire agreement, a large-scale ethnic disturbance erupted in the Muslim dominated Akkareipattu, Ampara District. Muslim groups blocked roads, tyres were set on fire and shops were forced to close. The reason was the report in all the mainstream media - apart from the Tamil press - that a Muslim youth who had recently disappeared had been abducted by the LTTE, and that a ransom of Rs. 5M had been paid.

The media never questioned the facts and the situation escalated into near anarchy. The LTTE denied the reports, yet the media continued to report the abduction by the LTTE, which was fueling the riot.

After the situation had been out of control for three days, the boy returned voluntarily. He admitted that he had gone into hiding, that he told a friend to say he had been abducted and that a ransom should be paid, so that he could use the money to go abroad.

In this case, the media played a specific role in fuelling a violent ethnic conflict, without verifying the facts or the sources. And once the facts had emerged – not because of the media's investigation, but because of the boy's confession – there was no apology nor retraction of the false claims.

Situations such as these demonstrate the media's responsibility to report the truth, and how failure to do so can result in increased tension, violence and racial vilification.

In a workshop in the ethnically diverse region of Ampara, where clashes are common, and suspicion and fear prevail, journalists debated the importance of understanding the impact of their journalism. They discussed how this story could have been better reported.

Reporting had initially put the story in a framework of ethnic tension. They understood that journalists often have a choice of how they report. Headlines can be about killing or about peace efforts.

Ethnic doesn't mean hostile

Good journalists report ethnic origin only when it is relevant to the story.

Journalists should be aware when a politician or ethnic political leader is pushing a line, and should assess whether a story is really news or just someone trying to use the media to inflame ethnic tensions.

Journalists may be tempted to mention someone's ethnic group if the story appears to support the stereotype. In doing so, they strengthen the prejudice - Muslims as suspect, Tamils as Tigers, Sinhalese as chauvinistic etc.

Journalists must never use racial or ethnic slurs, and they must be on their guard about adopting unconscious ethnic, religious or racial assumptions

When discussing journalists' use of restraint in reporting events or editorial decisions being affected by a fear of upsetting the ethnic balance, most journalists agreed their first commitment was to telling the truth and to press freedom.

All agreed they need to be careful not to be used by political leaders, to create the impression that ethnic interests are threatened, in order to secure political allegiance from one ethnic group.

Some of the most lively discussions in the program have been on ethics and stereotyping ethnicity. There was a clear understanding of the need for an ethical code for all journalists to adhere to.

CASE STUDY: Crime and ethnicity

The following case study is an example of a simple news story that was capped with a religious element, thereby distorting the subject and directing a sense of blame and accusation towards an entire religious group, instead of simply two individuals.

A page three headline in a Sinhala newspaper reads:
   "Girl brought as domestic help sold to playboys for four years – Suspected Muslim couple remanded."
   The fact that the couples' religion was mentioned in the headline immediately points to racial prejudice. But what is the relationship between this abuse and ethnicity?

If a person of a minority ethnic group is suspected in relation to an offence, the culture of the Sri Lankan Sinhala media means ethnicity is often related to the offence.

The Code of Ethics of The Editors' Guild states, "The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a person's race, colour, religion, sex or to any physical or mental illness or disability".

Good practice questions:

1. Before you file your report, do you ask yourself if you really know the true cause of the conflict?
2. Does your media house regularly report all sides to a story or does it rely mainly on the official positions of government?
3. How do we decide when it is relevant to mention someone's ethnicity?
4. What is the policy of your publication or broadcast channel on mentioning the ethnic origin of people who have been accused or convicted of crime?
5. How often is a crime or disturbance blamed on ethnic tensions, without proper investigation of other factors?
6. How will you develop first hand sources in other ethnic communities?
7. Are ethnic or other minority groups always mentioned in relation to certain issues e.g. crime, violence etc? Do you ever give them the right of reply?
8. Are reports by your publication, television or radio station influenced by the ethnicity or religion of the publisher, editors or reporters?
9. Do you think that your media house engages in stereotyping or labelling people engaged in conflict because of their religion or ethnicity?

Ethnicity Checklist:

◆ Avoid reference to a person's ethnicity, race or religion

◆ If it is necessary to refer to a person's ethnicity, race or religion confirm these details with the person to ensure accuracy

◆ Where other news sources unnecessarily treat ethnicity as a cause, educate readers on the real causes and point out that ethnicity was not a factor.

◆ Understanding your own biases is vital and should be kept in mind when preparing or selecting news reports.

◆ Using images is a useful way of avoiding descriptions that might cause offence.

◆ Ask sources how they would like you to describe them – in terms of their race, religion and ethnicity for example.

Covering all fronts

Journalists can help ease tensions by telling the stories that are important to their communities. Instead of simply reacting to events or announcements, journalists need to leave the newsroom in search of stories, and investigate and report the concerns of communities before they reach the point of violence.

Finding unusual and interesting ways to tell a story will draw more people's attention to the issue and encourage constructive and informed debate. Making stories interesting is a journalist's professional responsibility and may require them to make extra efforts. For example, spending a day with an internally displaced or homeless person to find out how an issue affects them and acknowledging a voice that is frequently unheard. This kind of reporting also gives journalists the chance to test the stereotypical images of different groups in their community.

In any situation, and especially in times of conflict, there are an infinite number of narratives. Journalists can pursue a peace agenda by questioning the news values that place a higher priority on reporting incidences of violence or statements by the Government, and by pursuing their own investigations into issues affecting women, children and families.

In the wake of the tsunami, there are a multitude of stories to be found in the camps and communities, as people try to rebuild their lives. Yet most of the media coverage of the tsunami showed was about the government's interventions.

Through factual reporting of how ordinary people live, and human rights, the media can help people to understand each other.

But we need to guard against so-called "developmental journalism" that attempts to tie journalists to political goals and a government line compromising their independence and watchdog capacity. Post tsunami, some have tried to muzzle criticism of the relief and reconstruction effort and there have been instances where negative reports have been branded unpatriotic in the state-owned media.
(IFJ, 2005)

Media Monitoring

The "official" tsunami news

A report tabled by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in the wake of the 2004 tsunami examined the ways in which the state-controlled Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporations (SLRC) news broadcasts covered all aspects of the disaster between January 1 and 7, 2005.

Prior to the preparation of this report, the CPA had established a general consensus in Sri Lanka that the government and opposition should work together to meet the widespread disaster caused by the tsunami.

The report monitored 13 news categories related to general post tsunami coverage. These categories included: National reconstruction, government intervention, foreign aid, victims of the tsunami, collective participation in rebuilding, distribution of relief assistance and children affected by the tsunami.

Of the 13 categories monitored, coverage of government intervention was found to be the most frequent, with 42 related news items over the seven day period. Close behind, there were 41 reports focusing on the national reconstruction process and 32 reports detailing foreign aid efforts.

Meanwhile, coverage of the victims of the tsunami featured only 9 times during the seven days. Reports detailing the distribution of relief assistance appeared 8 times during the period while coverage of the children affected by the tsunami surfaced a mere 6 times.

Importantly, insofar as duration was concerned, there was a high correlation between the frequency of news reports and the amount of time that they were allocated. Findings indicated that coverage of the national reconstruction totalled to around 46 minutes over the weeklong period, while coverage of the tsunami victims

Jason South

Focusing on the 'human element' is a vital means of contextualizing the issue for audiences

totalled to around 7 minutes.

The report concluded that in its post tsunami news telecasts, the SLRC coverage of the tsunami promoted the image of the government while not allocating adequate time to those affected by the Tsunami to voice their needs. Furthermore, the report found that despite the relatively high level of devastation and destruction in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, the SLRC accorded these areas low coverage when compared with that afforded to southern Sri Lanka.

What the report indicates is that there was a failure to effectively examine the way in which the tsunami impacted upon the day-to-day lives of people affected by the disaster. Focusing on the 'human element' is a vital means of contextualizing the issue for audiences and of consequently motivating the general public to support the relief effort.

Dealing with bias

Some of the most revealing discussions among Sri Lankan journalists were about the need for independent journalism and journalists' allegiance to their ethnic group or "nationalist struggle". Journalists were generally open and honest about their attachment to the communities and groups they report on, and the professional and ethical challenges involved. As one journalist in Jaffna said, "We are not machines, we are human".

The complete elimination of bias might be impossible and perhaps this is not a bad thing. We all "need a sense of what matters and why, if we are to make sense of the political and social landscape.

This doesn't mean that bias cannot be minimised and indeed, journalists have a "duty to seek to minimise it in themselves". (Levy, 2004)

Clearly, the journalist who acknowledges that he or she does not exist outside the community with all its social and political ideologies, economic circumstances and ethnic biases, can take steps to address any potential bias and ensure that it does not prevent a diversity of voices being heard and understood in their stories.

Editorial independence

Much of the media in Sri Lanka, including broadcast media and the largest newspaper group, is state-controlled. It has little editorial independence and there is much evidence of government influence. (IFJ, 2003) The news content of privately owned media is also subject to the control of the commercial and political interests of its owners.

Media can easily be turned into propagandists unless institutions, including the journalists that work in them, develop an understanding of the real meaning of the doctrine of the 'separation of powers'.

Media that is independent of political and commercial pressure can contribute significantly to the evolution and effectiveness of democracy. But media can also easily be turned into a propaganda tool unless media organizations and the journalists working in them understand the real

meaning of journalistic independence.

The public right to know, which underpins our human rights, is under threat while our access to independent media is also under threat.

This is the challenge facing journalists. But experience has shown that journalists themselves need to work together to demand respect for their right to work independently, in accordance with their ethical and professional codes.

CASE STUDY: Calling bias

The following case study shows what can happen when the journalism code of conduct is ignored, and the influence journalists' reporting can have. Ethnicity is used as a divisive tool here, to misinform and sway the attitudes of the readers, at a time when religious conversion is a major conflict trigger point.

An experienced Sri Lankan journalist published an article in a Sinhala daily, entitled "The confessions of a Buddhist who escaped from a fundamentalist."

The article was about a Buddhist who had briefly been a member of a fundamentalist Christian sect. It reveals the aggressive manner in which the group imparted its belief, and the information had the potential to provoke the Buddhist community.

The article was published at a time when religious sects – such as the Christian one profiled - and mainstream churches were under attack. The President and the Prime Minister had denounced such attacks as acts of fundamentalists and asked that the perpetrators be brought to account.

However, the article failed to portray sufficient balance.

It featured several leaders of the fundamentalist sects, but only the ethnicity of the Tamil leaders were mentioned, and in a way likely to provoke the feelings of the readers. For example, "The Tamil pastor spoke in anger…expecting to convert 65,000 Buddhist villagers to our religion (Christianity)…."

Was mentioning the ethnicity of the pastor necessary? Did it suggest he was preaching religion because he was Tamil? And why wasn't the ethnicity of the other leaders mentioned?

The article also revealed the locations of the prayer houses, increasing the possibility of violence against them. And if, as a consequence of the article, they had been attacked, the journalist could be seen as being an indirect accomplice.

In a society such as Sri Lanka's, that has lived in mutual fear and distrust over many years, it is common for any statement to be exaggerated and distorted. Unfortunately, the media has been a part of this conflict, rather than a partner in its resolution – especially in the Sinhala and Tamil language media.

This article would have been improved if the following guidelines had been kept in mind:

Are the facts true, honest and accurate?

Has the author verified all facts and sources?

Have all those mentioned been given fair and equal treatment?

Could the article promote ethnic or religious prejudices?

Could the article mislead the reader?

Many voices make the story

Gender: The case in conflict

Conflict and peace affects everyone, regardless of gender.

The way that we describe women and tell their stories has a profound influence on the way that society views and treats them. Women are usually portrayed as victims of war, with good reason. They are displaced, widowed, impoverished and physically and sexually abused.

But they are also combatants and positive instigators for change at all levels – the family, community and national level. Too little attention is given to this.

Women are affected differently by war than men. Stories that focus on women might include the conditions they face as widows, actions that support female-led households, women-driven initiatives for peace, the reasons women take up arms, and other security issues they face.

A recent meeting in Geneva of 32 female combatants from armed opposition groups in 18 conflict zones concluded that women resort to violence for different reasons to men, and may consequently be persuaded to reject them for different reasons.

"The modest conclusions of the Geneva meeting are worth noting. Most women said they fight only as a last resort. Women who had been raped, or had witnessed the killings of husbands or family members, were especially motivated." (Williams, 2005)

These motivating factors, and how they might affect peace negotiations, are newsworthy areas for journalistic investigation.

Colombo University's Neloufer de Mel, recently revealed to a conflict journalism workshop, that gender blindness affected reporting about the Tsunami victims, in the same way it affected reporting about victims of conflict.

The media failed to address the different needs women had. Apart from reports of sexual harassment and the rape of women (which resulted in better security measures for women in camps), issues such as the involvement of women in 'camp committees', their privacy, security and needs (for separate bathing facilities, for underwear and sanitary napkins) were not widely reported. Silence on these issues meant gender awareness was not high amongst many participating in the relief effort.

"In the way it was reported, the conditions that kept the women as victims and men as agents were hardly highlighted. The result folded into a stereotypical scripting of the women as helpless, the male as survivor. " (de Mel, 2005)

To get the full story, journalists need to include a wide range of women's perspectives in their stories, especially those who are often silenced, such as ethnic minorities.

Diversity in the newsroom

Recruiting a wider ethnic range of journalists and using minority languages are significant litmus tests for diversity reporting, but they do not guarantee it.

A key issue is the need for news organisations to reflect the diversity of their community in their own staff. There is a limit to the extent to which even the best journalists can understand the perspective of people who live very differently to them.

A diversity of staff will present a more open and accessible media. The audience can identify with at least some of the journalists and is more likely to trust the content. It is less likely that the newspaper, radio or TV station will be labelled as only serving the interests of one ethnic group. If ethnic diversity is reflected in reality, in senior positions as well as junior ones, it will genuinely change the way that news is reported.

Buddika Weerasingha

The media plays an important role in protecting children in conflict situations.

Media management and journalists have a responsibility to examine their own employment, training and reporting techniques, to see how they can improve and measure the results.

The first step is recognition. A staff profile should be ethnically balanced, a training regime should talk about the ethical dilemmas involved in dealing with intolerance, and a willingness should exist to examine and to monitor the editorial performance of media. This will raise awareness, broaden the horizons of news gatherers and reduce the incidence of error and prejudice arising from ignorance and incompetence.

There are a number of arguments for the need for diversity in media that may be useful to both management and journalists in tackling this issue:

◆ Ethnic diversity in editorial staffing attracts a broader range of readers, listeners and viewers. When target groups sense the familiarity of media coverage with their own lives, circulation and ratings will increase

◆ Journalism strives for fairness and impartiality, and diverse ethnic representation in newsrooms can improve access to diverse sources of information from minority communities

◆ Better ethnic representation in the workforce and more balanced coverage, attracts audiences from different backgrounds. Advertisers targeting people from different cultural backgrounds will prefer outlets where all ethnic communities are more visible

◆ Journalists and media from different groups should be encouraged to work together, to exchange information and to learn from each other. Dialogue within and between different media organisations is as important as dialogue between media and society at large.

Good practice questions

1. Are all jobs advertised?
2. Are steps taken to encourage applications from neglected groups?
3. Do you assume certain things about someone from their CV before offer them an interview?
4. Have you ever considered which work areas could benefit from journalists with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds and language skills?
5. Have you considered how a story might affect women? Have you sought their opinion?

The language of news

The research indicates that language is a major barrier to news gathering and accurate first hand reporting, particularly on issues and events affecting other communities. Encouraging multi-lingual journalists and teaming reporters of different languages on certain stories will build trust and give access to other language communities.

The area where journalists have ultimate control is in the choice of words and phrases used to describe events and issues.

Journalists must never use racial or ethnic slurs and need to acknowledge any unconscious assumptions about other ethnic and religious groups.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the media is grappling with language to describe aspects of the socio-political context after a ceasefire agreement. Words like "communalism" is used indiscriminately by the Tamil press to interpret the Sinhala community.

Often, communal tensions become ethnic hatred and minor disputes become major ethnic conflicts when reported in the Tamil and Sinhala language press. Definitions of majority and minority are often twisted to fit a certain argument – minority in the Sinhala media can undermine the legitimacy of 'other' communities. Conversely, the use of the term 'majority' in the Tamil media to represent the Sinhalese community is often unreflective of the diversity of opinions and political ideologies present.

Stereotypes and the demonisation of communities might be an inevitable result of long standing ethnic violence. A Tamil suspected of any crime is automatically labelled a terrorist, while a Sinhalese is given the benefit of the doubt. Tamil, terrorist, LTTE – words that cannot be used interchangeably - are often used in the same news report.

Journalists need to re-examine with an independent and professional approach their reporting of issues like federalism and devolution, NGO and peace activists and foreign aid, which are often reported negatively and with pejorative use of political ideas to undermine their support and the stakeholders who try to promote them.

Do inflammatory reports that paint these as detrimental to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity, stability and unity fulfill the journalistic obligation to provide communities with reliable and accurate information?

Good practice questions

1. Have an editorial team meeting and discuss some recent stories – look at them from the point of view of gender, age and ethnicity
2. How is ethnicity handled in the news and feature stories?
3. How often is ethnicity presented as a 'problem'?
4. Do crime stories reinforce stereotypes? (Compare how many calls a week are made to the police with the number of visits reporters make into the community)
5. Make determined efforts to build links with the community
6. Encourage reporters to go out and visit communities
7. See if you can set up an advisory group from within a targeted community
8. Offer someone a guest column
9. On TV or in newspapers look at the pictures you are using. Do they reflect the balance of your community? Count up the men who appear in one issue or one bulletin. Is that a fair reflection of the community?
10. Improve your contacts within neglected communities
11. Ask reporters to pool their contacts, and brainstorm ideas for getting more.

Hearing children's voices

Especially in conflict situations, children are more open to

Diversity checklist

The Seattle Times developed a 'diversity checklist' for reporters and editors.
These questions are adapted from that checklist:

Questions for editors

◆ Am I making diversity a priority in the assignment and scheduling of stories?
◆ Am I giving reporters the time to pursue diverse sources and stories?
◆ Do I get out of the office to develop sources and contacts in diverse communities?

For reporters

◆ Do I attempt to find out how the actions of organisations I cover affect people in different ethnic populations in our community?
◆ Do I seek stories that originate with community members affected by the organisation?
◆ How can I expand the types of people, places and organisations from which I draw story ideas and angles?
◆ How do I expand my own lists of contacts and sources?

On a story

◆ Have I sought diverse sources for this story?
◆ Have I allowed preconceived ideas to limit my efforts to include diversity?
◆ Am I employing "tokenism," allowing one person to represent a community, or am I seeking true diversity?
◆ Am I furthering stereotypes - or battling stereotypes - as I seek diversity?
◆ Am I telling the truth as I see it?
◆ What are the likely consequences of publication? Who will be hurt and who will be helped?
◆ Will I be able to clearly and honestly explain - not rationalise - my decision to anyone who challenges it?

exploitation and need adults to protect them. Too many are forcibly recruited as child soldiers, trafficked both within and across countries and sold for commercial labour, including sexual slavery.

As people working for the media – and so powerful shapers of adult behaviour towards children - we play an important role in protecting children in conflict situations.

Journalists around the world, through the IFJ, have agreed on an international set of guidelines for reporting on children. Journalists have affirmed the importance of including children's opinions, without exploiting them, and without exposing children to those they are most vulnerable to – pimps, traffickers, recruiters and abusive parents.

One of the most difficult ethical issues is whether to name children or show their faces in photographs or on film. The IFJ Guidelines say that media professionals should guard against visually or otherwise identifying children unless it is demonstrably in the public interest. The first duty of the media is to avoid inflicting further harm on a child, and in many cases further harm will be brought by publicity that identifies child soldiers or sexual abuse victims.

Interviewing children who have suffered abuse or trauma is particularly challenging for journalists and needs great care. Trying to elicit graphic details may force the child to re-visualize and re-experience the events. We should always question whether the interview with the child is worth doing in the first place and whether there isn't another way the story can be reported.

Getting it first hand

The best journalism reflects the richness of experience and can only be done by developing first hand sources. Sources will help tell the stories about ordinary people, the way they live, their fears, their hopes, their triumphs and their disasters. This sense of richness does not come to journalists waiting in the newsroom for official news to arrive in a government press release.

It means a fundamental change of direction for many journalists and media organisations towards looking for, listening to and reporting on people's experiences. For media organisations, it means putting the resources into getting journalists out into the field.

People look for a better way of life, a fairer distribution of resources, and a better framework for their existence. By reporting on these issues, journalists can contribute to this framework.

Journalists who want more voices in their stories must begin by developing a bank of sources. Every contact becomes an opportunity to expand a source list beyond government spokespeople –the mainstay of news reporters for decades. Doctors, lawyers, academics and community leaders can provide a different perspective to a routine story.

Being part of a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic community means you need reliable sources in other communities.

The best reporters have the most extensive network of diverse sources. A range of sources also allows cross checking information for accuracy. Information from people who were present at an event or incident i.e. first hand sources are always preferable. Relying on hearsay and speculation from second hand sources can result in inaccuracies.

Women are victims of war... but they are also combatants *and* positive instigators for change.

Good practice points

◆ Draw up a list of your sources, share the list with colleagues, and keep adding to it.

◆ Focus on building contacts among other religious and ethnic groups, who can provide authoritative opinions on a variety of subjects.

Tips on interviewing people from other groups

The Media Diversity Institute, together with the IFJ, prepared these tips for journalists:

◆ Be sensitive and thoughtful - understand that people may be scared about talking to a journalist – and try to put them at ease.

◆ Understand and respect any conditions they may have placed on the interview. Clarify whether or not they mind having their name used.

◆ If you have a choice of where to interview them, decide on a place where they feel comfortable. Their own environment may also help you to understand their perspective.

◆ Let them tell you their story in their own way. If they want to start with what happened five or 10 years ago, let them, even if it seems to you that it is not exactly relevant to what you want to know.

◆ Be flexible. Write up a list of questions beforehand, but only use it as a general guide. As you ask your questions, listen carefully to what they say, so that you are open to other approaches.

◆ Do not preach to them about how they should live their lives. They understand their situation much better than you do which is why you are interested in interviewing them.

◆ Acknowledge to yourself any biases or prejudices you have about the minority they belong to and then try to put those ideas aside when interviewing and preparing your story.

◆ Remember that your sources are experts. An expert is not just a doctor or scientist. Your sources are experts on their own lives. You want them to describe their lives and experience to you and your job is to convey that to your audience.

◆ At the end of the conversation, ask if they know any other people who might be willing to be interviewed. This can be an important method of finding other sources for this or future articles.

◆ Above all, be careful how you use the information. When you write about them, do so with care and compassion. It is easy to frighten members of your audience when you report about people from a different background by using stereotypes, inflammatory or derogatory language, unverified information, and other biased material. Your role, however, is to help your audience understand other people and empathise with rather than fear them.

Buddika Weerasingha

Conflict Reporting Guidelines

The Sri Lankan media has the ability to contribute to the de-escalation of the conflict and to enhance political stability and respect for human rights. After years of political and social unrest, and the 2004 tsunami, the media's role is now more important than ever.

It is our job, through our reporting and through revealing the issues, to help people understand each other's differences — cultural, religious, ethnic and otherwise. This does not mean concealing issues to paper over divisions. It means reporting with an understanding of their complexity.

It means looking beyond the official news for the deeper, fuller story. It means looking for new sources, new ideas and new opportunities to build tolerance.

Through providing an understanding of conflict, its impact on ordinary people and by exploring possible solutions, there is a better chance of ending tensions.

The following guidelines incorporate suggestions from journalists working in conflict situations around the world. They are provided for consideration and are not intended to be exhaustive.

The media has an important role to play in promoting an honest and pluralistic political debate.

Factual Accuracy:

Ensure accuracy and speed by building a bank of diverse and reliable sources of information that will allow journalists to quickly gather and verify information. The IFJ survey on Sri Lankan journalists' experiences and attitudes indicates the importance of crosschecking for accuracy. Statements should not be accepted at face value from any source, as even 'official' sources can be incorrect.

Distinguish clearly between first and second hand information.

Diversity in the newsroom, with reporters from a range of language backgrounds, will break down language barriers and give access to a wider range of sources.

Should an error be made, acknowledge it as quickly as possible and correct it.

Balance:

Conflict situations are never black-and-white. Examine and include the views of all parties involved.

The best journalism will result from using first hand sources. Only they can tell the stories about ordinary people's lives.

Go beyond the official line and the empirical data. Reporting the human side of a story will not only hold people's attention, it will also motivate them to become involved in an issue rather than sit back and watch it unfold.

Sensitivity:

Unnecessarily mentioning race, religion or ethnicity can offend some people and can either fuel existing stereotypes or encourage others to make assumptions.

There are several ways to prevent this outcome. Firstly, try to understand any biases you might have. Secondly, bear in mind how people will react to what is being said and bear this in mind when you write. Thirdly, where possible, use images to communicate details that are difficult to explain in words without causing confusion or offence.

Context:

Situating events in their historical context gives readers a better understanding of the current developments. Without context, it is easy to lose sight of the broader picture and the possibility for change or reform. Contextualizing an issue also involves examining the experiences of the people involved. However, rather than asking a third party or assuming how other groups have been affected, ask them directly. Context represents a vital component of conflict journalism, as it ensures audiences understand the issues involved and prevents them from becoming confused or, worse still, indifferent.

Responsibility:

Without care and responsibility, conflict reporting can amplify existing tensions, opening the way for political manipulation by governments. It is therefore necessary to carefully consider the way certain statements, headlines, images or news content will affect people, particularly minority groups. Ultimately, the media has a responsibility to the communities they serve to report fairly, accurately and honestly and provide them with the information they need to control their lives.

Useful resources & bibliography

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Williams, L, "Assessing the rights and wrongs of women at war", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 8, 2005

There are many organizations with useful resources for journalists reporting on conflict. They include:

Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance (SLTMA)
113/6, Eli House Road,
Colombo 15,Sri Lanka
tamilmedia@hotmail.com
www.sltma.com

Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF)
A3,1/1, Manning town,
Colombo 08, Sri Lanka
phone: (+94) 011 2688293
Fax: (+94) 0114204765

Free Media Movement (FMM)
237/22, Wijaya Kumaratunga Mawatha,
Colombo 05, Sri Lanka
Phone: +94 777 312457 or + 94 777 394959
Fax: + 94 11 4714460
fmm@diamond.lanka.net

Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions (FMETU)
Lake House, Colombo 10
Phone: 94 1 472.407 Fax: 94 1 472.407
E-mail: fmetu@sltnet.lk

Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA)
276/3 Pradeepa Mawathe, Maligawatthe
Colombo 10
Phone: +94 1 429 248 Fax: +94 1 429 240

The Colombo-based Centre for Policy Alternatives cites its key objective as disseminating and advocating policy alternatives for non-violent conflict resolution and democratic governance. The organization, whose work incorporates a major research component, promotes accurate reliable and unbiased reporting. www.cpalanka.org

The Danish International Media Support is committed, through assistance and support to media, to ensuring the development of democracy in conflict or conflict threatened regions. www.i-m-s.dk

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting is based in London, with offices in South Eastern Europe and Asia focuses on strengthening local journalism in conflict-affected regions by building the capacity of local journalists to produce balanced and accurate reports. www.iwpr.net

The Media Diversity Institute is based in London, with offices in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. MDI works with media organizations, journalists, journalism educators, NGOs and governments to promote fair, sensitive and accurate coverage of diversity-related issues. www.media-diversity.org

The US-based Poynter Institute promotes the value of independent journalism through training and it's resourceful website. www.poynter.org

The UK-based Reporting the World seeks to foster an ongoing conversation among journalists and others about issues of representation and responsibility in conflict and international news. www.reportingtheworld.org.uk

Based in Canada, the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society is a charitable organization that supports an accountable and accessible media and government policies that foster democratic development. www.impacs.org

IFJ International Code of Practice for the Safe Conduct of Journalism

The dangers posed to journalists and media staff working in dangerous situations and conflict zones are the subject of extensive record. The IFJ has recorded the deaths of more than 1000 journalists and media staff over the past ten years.

Many journalists are killed, injured or harassed in war zones, either targeted by one side or another or caught in the crossfire of violence. Others are the victims of premeditated assault and intimidation by criminals and terrorists or by agencies of the state - the police, the military or the security forces - acting secretly and illegally.

Very often, there is little that journalists or media organisations can do to avoid casualties. There will, inevitably, be accidents, no matter how much care is taken to provide protection. Unfortunately, there is little one can do when those targeting the media use ruthless and brutal methods to crush journalistic inquiry.

However, there are steps that journalists and media organisations should take to minimise the risks to staff. In particular, the following are vital considerations in providing protection:

Adequate preparation, training and social protection. It is essential that journalists and media staff be in a state of readiness when difficulties arise. There should be a framework for providing individuals with health care and social protection.

Media professionals must be informed and inform themselves about the political, physical, and social terrain in which they are working. They must not contribute to the uncertainty and insecurity of their conditions through ignorance or reckless behaviour.

Media organisations must guard against risk-taking for commercial advantage, and should promote co-operation among journalists whenever conditions exist that are potentially hazardous.

Governments must remove obstacles to journalism. They must not restrict unnecessarily the freedom of movement of journalists or compromise the right of news media to gather, produce and disseminate information in secure and safe conditions.

People must keep their hands off the media. Everyone should respect the physical integrity of journalists and media staff at work. Physical interference with filming or other journalistic work must be prohibited.

LIVE NEWS:
A Survival Guide for Journalists

In 2003 the IFJ published the media industry's most comprehensive guide to dealing with the risks of reporting in dangerous conditions. It has been translated into nine languages and is available from the IFJ Human Rights and Safety Office.

With these considerations in mind, the IFJ calls on journalists groups, media organisations and all relevant public authorities to respect the following:

1 Journalists and other media staff shall be properly equipped for all assignments, including the provision of first-aid materials, communication tools, adequate transport facilities and, where necessary, protective clothing;

2 Media organisations and, where appropriate, state authorities shall provide risk-awareness training for those journalists and media workers who are likely to be involved in assignments where dangerous conditions prevail or may be reasonably expected;

3 Public authorities shall inform their personnel of the need to respect the rights of journalists and shall instruct them to respect the physical integrity of journalists and media staff while at work.

4 Media organisations shall provide social protection for all staff engaged in journalistic activity outside the normal place of work, including life insurance;

5 Media organisations shall provide, free of charge, medical treatment and health care, including costs of recuperation and convalescence, for journalists and media workers who are the victims of injury or illness as a result of their work outside the normal place of work;

6 Media organisations shall protect freelance or part-time employees. They must receive, on an equal basis, the same social protection and access to training and equipment as that made available to fully employed staff.

The IFJ is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation that promotes coordinated
international action to defend press freedom and social justice and promote quality in journalism through
the development of strong, free and independent trade unions of journalists. IFJ Asia-Pacific coordinates IFJ
activities in the Asia-Pacific region. The IFJ works closely with the United Nations, particularly UNESCO, the
United Nations Human Rights Commission, WIPO and the ILO, the International Committee of the Red Cross,
the European Union, the Council for Europe and with a range of international trade union and freedom of
expression organisations. The IFJ mandate covers both professional and industrial interests of journalists.

Visit www.ifj-asia.org or www.ifj.org for more information.