Media Practice, Media Education and Politics in Sri Lanka

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In this short essay, Professor Sasanka Perera, former professor of sociology in the University of Colombo, discusses issues of media training and media education in Sri Lanka from the perspective of what he calls his 'double-life' as an academic and irregular journalist. He describes Sri Lanka's National Media Policy (2007) as 'a finely nuanced democratic text', but questions its value in the present political climate when many of its ideals are being violated by the government itself. He says that much media training is rooted in 'a highly utilitarian and technical paradigm' which he argues is fundamentally flawed and ultimately detrimental to democratic politics.

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1. <u>Approach</u>

Though formally trained as an academic in the field of social anthropology, I have also led at different times a not so secret double life. In that double life, I opted to masquerade as a journalist, mostly for the Colombo-based daily *The Island* for which I wrote a regular column called 'Alternate Space' and sometimes and less often for the Kathmandu based monthly *Himal South Asian* and a few other Sri Lankan publications. I mention this for a specific reason, which will also explain my approach in this essay. Often scholarship is a comfortable vocation in countries where political and social stability is taken for granted, which after all generated the term 'ivory tower' to refer to academia. I never believed this was possible to the same extent in countries like Sri Lanka, where political and social instability has been integrated with routine life for a very long time. In such situations, my belief was that academics cannot always be imprisoned within the relative comforts of academia, with no associations with the dynamics, ruptures and cleavages in the wider society. So my selective flirtations with journalism were a means to take what was generated in the domains of scholarly activity to the more accessible and often messy domains of public discourse. Many scholars elsewhere in the world have done this before quite effectively, and the best known among them perhaps are Noam Chomsky and Edward Said. From the point of view of social intervention, which electronic and print media the world over often claims for itself, scholarship is not the ideal forum. But if used carefully, scholarship and nuanced academic reasoning can help in deciding the directions mass media might take in a particular space if media practitioners are ready accept this possibility. In this sense, my approach in this essay is not an academic one: I will briefly place the nature of media training in Sri Lankan universities in the context of evolving media practice and wider politics in

the country as an informed observer and an irregular practitioner. But my academic moorings will not be completely severed, which naturally I cannot do.

This brings me to another issue I want to address at the very outset which has to do with the potential of media training in the country. In an attempt to articulate my position, let me reproduce an opinion I expressed in 2009 to a group of young individuals who were 'trained' in 'journalism' by a local non-government organization:

> For quite some time I have strongly believed that journalism in the wider sense of the word is not something that people can be trained in at an institution, be that a university or something else. I do not mean that the basic craft of how to write to a newspaper or magazine or how to produce a program for TV or radio cannot be imparted through training. This surely can be, as I am sure all of you must be able to by now. But my concern is not with the technical aspects of the craft but with the philosophical and ethical aspects of the practice.[1]

My misgivings, tempered by the practice of journalism in Sri Lanka as well as with the knowledge of the nature of journalism training within and beyond the country, have not completely left my conscience. This is not something I deal with any longer in the abstract. But it is a concern that helps me reflect on how media training might be formulated if not in an ideal sense, at least in a way that is somewhat more nuanced than it is today.

My approach in this essay will be coloured and fashioned by the concerns outlined above, as well as my 'double-life' as an academic and irregular journalist. The issue of journalism training, particularly at the university level in Sri Lanka cannot be undertaken without a sense of the media practice as it is currently evolving in Sri Lanka, which I will now proceed to address briefly.

2. *Truth as a Value and Victim of Journalism*

As any observer in Sri Lanka would be able to assert by looking at the violence directed at media institutions in the country and the killing and abduction of individual journalists as well as threats received by them, journalism is clearly a practice that is under siege in the country.[2] The reality of this siege and the mentality it has consequently created (along with idealized notions of journalism that pre-existed this state of affairs) has given local journalists a self-declared identity as the purveyors and projectors of the ultimate truth. This is an identity that almost all journalists across political and ethno-cultural boundaries seem to immensely cherish. Unfortunately, very few would often pause to reassess the realities camouflaged by this claim. Does this refer to the actuality of the practice at large or merely an ideal that still needs to be acquired, refashioned and realized? As I have noted elsewhere, "if we go by the highly idealized notion that journalism is about bringing in the truth to the world, then I suppose in the ideal sense there cannot be any

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[1] Excerpt from the keynote address delivered at the awards ceremony of the journalism course for young journalists organized by Viluthu: Centre for Human Resource Development, Restaurant Hall, BMICH, Colombo, 12 December 2009.

[2] For more information on the political stakes of journalism in Sri Lanka, please visit Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (http://www.jdslanka.org/2009/08/sri-lanka-thirty-four-journalists-media.html).

journalists anywhere in the world. In real terms, journalism is about narrating stories and making avenues for belief. It is not about the truth. Truth is not a concern for journalism but may be for religion. It is instead a matter of interpretation. The most convincing argument or interpretation will in the end become the truth, even though it might be far away from the actuality of an event." [3]

In this context, "when Sri Lanka's MTV says, 'we report you decide' what they really mean is: here is our version of the truth; you better believe it. When Derana TV says, 'First with the truth' what it really means is: That they are the first with that particular version of truth"[4]. When the last presidential election campaign was launched the electronic and print media introduced to Sri Lankans a variety of known and unknown characters vying for political office narrating very different versions of the truth to the local population; in this context, everybody was a hero; everybody was villain; everybody was a saint and everybody was a demon depending on who is talking about whom[5]. In this sense, media practice and journalism everywhere is far from reporting the truth. American journalist and conservative theorist, Walter Lippmann, understood the coercive nature of propaganda which naturally includes versions of journalism quite well. He thought that the role of propaganda was to "manufacture consent" and not about reporting truth or about being accurate. The majority of the population in any country, Lippmann noted, was the "bewildered herd," and the role of journalism and propaganda in the hands of the political elite was to protect themselves from the "trampling and the roar of the bewildered herd". As far as I can see, one of the most serious issues in Sri Lankan society today is not really the nature of journalism itself, but the non-existence of a critical intellectual tradition and the institutional structure to sustain it, that could generate serious debate, research and knowledge about journalism and its local practice. This is an issue I will revisit when specifically looking into the dynamics of training in universities. It is in this context that journalism and media in Sri Lanka have assumed a somewhat self-righteous self-portrayal and enormous power, without often paying attention to the responsibilities that ideally should come with this role or concern for ethics. That is why often we see that Sri Lankan journalism is mired in somewhat obvious party politics in the context of which the first casualty always is that elusive ideal, the 'truth'. It is in this context that the reliability of what we see, hear and read in the media tends to diminish. James Curran and Jean Seaton in their book, *Power without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting History in Britain* (1997), make the following comment that elaborates my concern with specific reference to reporting news:

> The values which inform the selection of news items usually serve to reinforce conventional opinions and established authority. At the same time, a process of simplification filters out the disturbing and the unexpected. The need of the media to secure instant attention creates a strong prejudice in favour of familiar stories and themes, and a slowness of response when reality breaks the convention.[6]

[3] Much of the discussion in this section is based on excerpts from my previously quoted keynote address, BMICH, Colombo, 12 December 2009.

[4] Sasanka Perera, 'Media Practice as a Problem of Representation.' In, *Post Tsunami Media Coverage: The Sri Lankan Experience - A Study of the Media Behaviour.* Colombo: Transparency International, 2005.

[5] Sasanka Perera, keynote address, 12 December 2009.

[6] James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting History in Britain.* 5th Edition. London: Routledge, 1997, p 277.

Tuchman has also noted that in the process of making news, objectivity is little more than a protective strategic ritual, a set of conventions about the origins and presentation of facts that allows journalists to defend their selection of newsworthy events and interpretations. [7] Though articulated in the context of journalism in the UK, it is clear that these conditions apply to the working of journalism anywhere in the world, and certainly to the Sri Lankan context.

Though the actuality of media practice in the country is as described above, where the regime plays a significant role in controlling and undermining media practice, it also provides a legal framework that is expected to usher in a free and democratic media. In this context, it would be quite instructive to place in context selected components of the Sri Lankan government's *National Media Policy* which is the most crucial political document on the subject. For instance, the preamble of the *National Media Policy* issued by the Ministry of Mass Media and Information states that the purpose of the policy is to 'guide' the media, as there was "no systematic National Media Policy to guide media practice in the country" [8] in the post-Independence period. Further, according to the preamble, "this Media Policy stems from the axiom that a democratic society should possess a policy system that would authoritatively uphold the right of the media to articulate and express their views, to provide advice and guidance and to adopt a critical attitude, whenever necessary. This media policy upholds further the view that the freedom essential for the people to receive the information and knowledge needed to enable them to become well-informed citizens in a free, democratic society, should be ensured. It is expected that the present National Media Policy will be given the deference that is due to a guiding principle by all media practitioners – both in the electronic and print sectors and also by media institutions"[9].

The declared mission of the *National Media Policy* is focused on "achieving excellence in the total practice of media by creating a people-centred, development-oriented, free, and responsible media culture as required by a well-informed and democratic society" .Similarly, the objectives of the policy are: "to create a media culture that upholds national identity, unity in diversity and harmony; to establish a media tradition with a clear understanding of its social responsibility; to bring about a socially responsible, ethical media culture ensuring media freedom; to bring about an enabling environment to encourage and promote professionalism among media practitioners and organizations; and to pave the way to create a media environment in keeping with technological advancements and best media practices". [10]

As a document that contains the above declared positions as well as sections on implementation, freedom of information and the right to express opinions, the *National Media Policy* appears to be a fine democratically nuanced text. However, it becomes meaningless when many of its ideals are violated quite openly by the government itself or by its proxies as indicated by the violence

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[7] Ibid,
[8] Ministry of Mass Media and Information, *National Media Policy* (Draft), Colombo, Ministry of Mass Media and Information, Government of Sri Lanka, 2007.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

directed against media agencies considered 'unfriendly' towards the government.[11] In this sense, the national media policy itself is a text which has become devoid of context and political sense when located within the parameters of the political climate within which it must derive its existence and meaning.

In this sense, the teaching of media related courses in universities and other institutions of training must be assessed in a situation where independent media practice in the country has been under threat for quite some time, while the media policy of the government itself does not have any significant existence beyond the mere text of the *National Media Policy* itself.

3. *Media Training: Learning without Vision?*

Training of individuals in media related disciplines, which are often called 'journalism' or 'mass communication' in the Sri Lankan academic parlance, needs to be understood in one important context. That is, the relative dismantling of the critical edge in Sri Lankan higher education, which is most clearly manifest in social sciences and humanities since the 1960s. And it is in these extended domains of knowledge production that courses related to media studies are usually located in Sri Lanka. In effect, the formal introduction of media related courses took place in local universities well after the degeneration of the quality of research, teaching and publishing in Sri Lanka had already set in.[12] In other words, this rather complex constellation of knowledge that ideally comes under media studies was based on an intellectual foundation that was essentially flawed and ruptured. Delinked from the intellectual moorings it ideally ought to have had, it was conceived, introduced and promoted as a mere technical subject with job prospects in the 'glamour' worlds of mass media. The glamour component was more pronounced in this scenario consequent to the rapid expansion of electronic media in the country since the 1980s. In order to proceed further with this discussion, let me briefly outline what media courses in selected Sri Lankan universities generally offer at present.

The journalism courses offered for the General Degree in Arts at the University of Colombo is a classic example of a linear structure of courses heavy on 'production' and very lean on 'media theory.' More importantly, as far as the course structure is concerned, there is no effort to root the course in an intellectual context informed by a philosophy of knowledge and wider understanding of social theory. As a result, a political and historical understanding of media in general and Sri Lanka in particular is manifestly absent in the course. Similarly, the structure for the Diploma Course in Journalism offered by the University of Colombo is also a narrowly focused technical course focusing on such themes as language and communication, mechanics of news-casting and creative writing in media. Even though there is a brief section on the 'history of journalism,' it appears to be an under-conceived basic course as evidenced by the vagueness of foci.

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[11] For more information on the political stakes in journalism in Sri Lanka, please visit Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (http://www.jdslanka.org/2009/08/sri-lanka-thirty-four-journalists-media.html).
[12] For a discussion of this phenomenon with a focus on the twin disciplines of sociology and social anthropology, please refer to my lecture titled 'Contemporary Social Sciences and Humanities in Sri Lanka: Towards a Reflexive Reading of the Disciplines of Sociology/Anthropology', delivered at the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka on 26th August 2010 (http://sasankaperera.com/?page_id=44).

The courses offered by the Sri Lanka College of Journalism falls under a number of main categories: Diploma in Journalism (electronic/print); Mid-Career Courses and Courses for Provincial Correspondents. Again, the technical emphasis on the craft is cleanly visible as opposed to the philosophical, historical and the ethical aspects of the practice. This is most clearly seen in the individual short courses offered to mid-career journalists which include the following: election reporting; provincial news management; sports journalism; crime and judicial reporting, voice training and news presentation skills; A to Z of current affairs programme production etc. One of the arguments that has often been voiced in support of the courses offered by the Sri Lanka College of Journalism is that they are focused on professional working journalists as opposed to undergraduate and post graduate courses in universities which are supposed to be 'academic'. However, as I would argue in this essay, the courses offered by universities are hardly academic in the real sense of the word. Besides, no professional course of any kind can be simply technical. This is certainly the case for media-related courses, where a great degree of social responsibility is built into the profession's self-assessment, at least as part of the local media rhetoric if not the actual practice.

The subjects offered for the degree programme in Mass Communication at Sabaragamuwa University also betray tendencies of partiality to simplistic technical details and lack of attention to intellectual, philosophical and ethical considerations. Moreover, the reading list is mostly in Sinhala, which benefits students in terms of their ability to read but nevertheless places in context the lack of depth in the conceptualization of the course. Sri Lanka has never been known as a place where significant texts in media studies in any language have been produced. As such, the over-dependence on Sinhala language materials, many of which are of dubious quality, would mean the limiting of the intellectual horizons of students. The curriculum for the honours degree programme in Mass Communication at the University of Kelaniya also indicates similar lapses. The teaching programme in Kelaniya is one of the oldest programmes in what might be vaguely called 'media studies' in the country. Even though it includes two courses specifically identified as Media Ethics and Media Law (which in itself is important), the non-specificity of these titles indicates a deeper weakness in conceptualising courses which is also seen in other courses such as Traditional Communication, Health Communication, Public Relations, Media Psychology and so on. Rather than a clear focus on specific aspects of media practice or contexts, these courses are so widely defined that a significant degree of emphasis becomes difficult.

Clearly, as I noted at the beginning of this discussion, formal education in media-related studies in the country reflects the serious dismantling of the social sciences that is quite evident in the higher education sector. The fact that these study programmes were introduced after the downward spiral of Sri Lankan higher education in general, and social sciences and humanities education in particular, had already begun, did not help its establishment or its later development and expansion. It was based on a simplistic set of assumptions that were strictly utilitarian and simplistically technical in nature and had no linkages with a serious process of teaching-learning, based on a clear research agenda or a robust understanding of social theory, history or politics. In other words, it was a sure recipe for the emergence of a mediocre intellectual practice within academia. Yet, what was needed was not something so radically new that it did not pre-exist in any other part of the world. Despite my own misgivings articulated at the beginning of this essay about the ability to teach media practice in a university setting, extensive courses closer to the

ideal have been available over a considerable period of time for borrowing, modification and re-adjustment in the local context, if the pioneers and the second generation of media educators in the country had the wisdom and common sense to simply look. Though by no means the only possibility of this nature and not without its own limitations, the *Model Curricular for Journalism Education* (2007) developed by UNESCO as a part of its series on journalism education is one example of what is available and what is possible. But it is clear that Sri Lankan educators came nowhere near this kind of basic model, leave alone surpassing basics.

So what does all this mean in the overall contexts of national politics, media dynamics and education? Clearly what exists in Sri Lanka is an unenviable situation. At the present moment and over a significant period of time, Sri Lankan regimes have not tolerated or appreciated the existence of an independent media. This situation is much more clearly visible and dangerous now than ever before. This means that media practice or journalism is an unsafe profession if it is to remain independent. Alternatively, in order to survive, it has to compromise its independence and be partial to political forces that control power. This situation becomes much more entrenched in a situation where journalism/media training itself is rooted in a highly utilitarian and technical paradigm that is almost anti-intellectual in the wider sense of the word. This means that in the final analysis, media practice as well as training is fundamentally flawed in Sri Lanka, which in the long run is manifestly detrimental to democratic politics as well as the emergence of an enlightened society.