

Sri Lanka's traditional media risks being jettisoned with its old political guard

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Social media has usurped the traditional media's influence in Sri Lankan politics, particularly after the Aragalaya - and even any improvement in media freedom under the new NPP government cannot solve the industry's entrenched problems

"LISTEN TO THE SONG," was my mother's advice on how to figure out who had won an election in Sri Lanka. This was way before the internet, back when Sri Lanka only had state-controlled television, radio and print outlets as news sources. The power any ruling party had over them was absolute. A seasoned election-watcher, she knew through experience that radio producers had an ingenious method to side-step party messaging. They had certain song sets for each political party, and the songs aired as election results trickled in indicating who the forerunners were.

On 14 November, the day of Sri Lanka's parliamentary election, the same work was done not by songs but something more contemporary - memes. Across social media, these gave the best indication that the nation had voted overwhelmingly for the leftist National People's Power (NPP), and rejected the country's traditional political powers. One meme juxtaposed the results of the postal vote in Galle district from 2024 and 2019 - when Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the now reviled former president, won power. In a refreshing change, the bulk of the content online was devoid of pretentious political punditry, and most posts were laced with that very Sri Lankan trait of dark humour.

This was a symbol of how memes and social media had seemingly overtaken traditional media outlets as the public's main source of information on the election. Just as Sri Lankans have jettisoned the corrupt old political guard in the recent parliamentary election - and in the [presidential election](#) in September, [won by the NPP's Anura Kumara Dissanayake](#) - they are also close to kicking the country's traditional media off its once lofty perch.

Online information networks remained largely peripheral to politics in Sri Lanka until about two years ago. Yes, social media had been exerting a growing influence at least since 2010, when Mahinda Rajapaksa as president began actively using social media as a PR tool. Others soon joined in - including many bad-faith actors, as seen during riots targeting Muslims in the central and eastern parts of the country in February 2018. During the violence, rioters used WhatsApp groups as hubs for coordination. Amid elections in 2015, 2019 and 2020, election observers raised concerns over Facebook pages being used to contravene regulations around transparency in ad spending, and to spread misinformation. But it was in 2022 that social media cemented its role as a game-changer in Sri Lanka, usurping traditional media houses and journalists.

In early 2022, the long-suffering Sri Lankan public took to the streets en-masse, protesting against

an [unprecedented economic collapse](#) and the misgovernance that led up to it. Legacy media outlets, which largely took their cues from political power centres, failed to report on the rising public anger. But that did not mean the anger could be hidden: this time, all that anyone needed to get their view out into the world was a mobile phone with a passable internet connection.

The protest movement, which came to be identified as the [Aragalaya](#) – the Struggle – was unique on many levels. They had no political party or leader at the helm, as had been the case with past protests. Attempts by various politicians to hijack or subdue the movement were forcefully thwarted by the public. A general antipathy towards party politics was writ large across the movement. Racial and religious frictions, defining features of Sri Lankan politics, were dialled down. And social media became the glue holding the protests together everywhere they broke out across the country, providing a round-the-clock cacophony of commentary and news.

As citizens asserted their rights on the streets, journalists faced a moment of reckoning. “We had to choose between our job and raising our voice as citizens,” a senior investigative journalist told me. “I decided on the former. Many of my younger colleagues chose the latter.” The journalist said that her junior colleagues on the streets reporting on the movement increasingly identified with the protesters. As the protests reached their climax – Gotabaya was forced to flee in mid-July – one of her colleagues openly condemned the heavy-handed government repression and “tweeted using ‘us’ to identify with the protests.”

THE MEDIA INDUSTRY in Sri Lanka has long been beset by political bias, editorial interference by media owners, a lack of professional acumen and terribly low pay. The country’s biggest media owner is the government, which controls various television channels, print newspapers and radio stations operating in Sinhala, Tamil and English. While these government-owned media outlets are used predictably and often as publicity arms of the ruling powers, privately owned media organisations also push out partisan agendas favoured by their owners, whether pro-government or pro-opposition.

Dilith Jayaweera, a candidate in this September’s presidential election, owns two national television channels, a radio station and three newspapers. “The channels were used to promote his candidacy,” said Deepanjalie Abeywardana, a deputy director looking at media and politics at Verite Research, a private think tank that provides research and analysis on the Sri Lankan media. “But it was not the only case,” Abeywardana added. Verite Research’s analysis established that all of the country’s television news channels favoured their chosen candidates. Jayaweera was among the three presidential candidates to receive the most airtime on Derana TV, which he controls, behind the incumbent [Ranil Wickremesinghe](#) and the opposition leader Sajith Premadasa. The same analysis showed that the state-run Independent Television Network and the national television network, Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, gave the most airtime to Wickremesinghe.

While the main target of the Aragalaya was the political elite that brought the country to economic meltdown, the public’s disgust at the partisan traditional media was also clear in the movement. This was most clear in how many turned to social media for information and updates, knowing that established outlets could not be trusted. Prominent protest organisers became popular online commentators and analysts. At the most popular protest site – the Gota Go Gama, erected right in front of the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo – there was even a media hub for press conferences, where both mainstream media and social media channels could capture the voices of the protesters.

The government recognised the growing role and power of social media. In April 2022, amid the

protests, it blocked social media platforms – and not for the first time. But this lasted for only 15 hours, partly because it failed to prevent protesters from gathering in defiance of a curfew, and partly due to pressure from institutions like the country's human rights commission, which said that blanket censorship of social media was not permissible.

After Gotabaya was deposed, to be replaced as president by Wickremesinghe, the Aragalaya wound down. Wickremesinghe, despite all efforts by himself and his supporters, could not shake off the perception that he was part of the same politics as the Rajapaksas. Continuing public anger did not manifest in street protests again, partly due to the arrest of key protesters, but it was visible and constant on social media.

As the NPP, earlier a bit-part political player, stepped up to present an alternative, social media became an incubator for its support base. With the public mood clearly having shifted from before the Aragaaya, even the country's traditional media, so long used to its position close to political power, had to take note. "They could not ignore the loud calls against corruption and change," Abeywardana said. To stay relevant, sections of the mainstream media adopted some strategies of social media users, taking up the more performative aspects of online popularity sometimes at the cost of journalistic values.

There has been a trend towards activist journalism. One prominent Sinhala journalist, Tharindu Jayawardena, who before the protests had quit his job at the Lankadeepa, the country's largest-circulation newspaper, launched his own outlet, MediaLK, in 2019. He now focuses on investigative reporting, with stories highlighting corruption, human rights issues and other topics often downplayed or ignored in Sri Lankan news. His recent stories have covered the police's crackdown on Remembrance Day commemorations marking the end of Sri Lanka's civil war, and investigations into allegations that army intelligence was complicit in the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019.

There have been some positive signs in the media since the NPP won the presidential election in September. Abeywardana said that Verite Research's media-monitoring arm had detected a drop in racial and ethnic hate speech in political discourse and media coverage. The government-run Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, better known as Lakehouse, has called for applications to fill top editorial posts at its newspapers. Earlier, the usual way was for ruling parties to appoint their stooges to top posts at government establishments, including Lakehouse.

And that was hardly all. In a particularly dramatic incident in 2018, when the president, Maithripala Sirisena, illegally appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as his prime minister, unionists affiliated with the Rajapaksas' Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) stormed state-owned media institutions including Lakehouse, Independent Television Network and Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, changing front pages and interrupting live broadcasts to announce Rajapaksa's appointment. At least one journalist was told that the unionists had orders from an SLPP parliamentarian, Keheliya Rambukwella.

Journalists have also called for the government and industry groups to collaborate on streamlining the issuance of official media IDs. This accreditation has lost its credibility after successive governments provided media IDs to their supporters irrespective of whether they were real journalists. On occasion, IDs have also been held back as a way to punish and harass critics. The Department of Government Information, which manages media accreditation, did not respond to my questions about the process for issuing IDs.

While there is some hope that the new NPP government will allow greater freedom for the media, many journalists want to wait and see before they pass judgment. "It is too early to predict anything," Gagani Weerakoon, a co-convenor of the Sri Lanka chapter of South Asia Women in Media, said. Two developments have especially fuelled scepticism. The NPP has recently backpedalled on its promise to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act, saying it would instead take steps to prevent its misuse. The Act, first adopted in 1982, has been a tool "to target, and harass minorities, activists, journalists and critical voices," according to Amnesty International. Then there is the [Online Safety Act](#), passed earlier this year despite criticism that it could be used to quell online dissent and free speech. The NPP has said it plans to study the law with a view to amending it - it has not made concrete promises to repeal the law.

Abeywardana and Weerakoon agreed that, whatever the environment under the NPP, the Sri Lankan media's existential struggles will not end any time soon. Long-term issues like editorial interference by media owners, violence against journalists, low pay, an erosion of professional acumen and expertise are likely to persist. As the parliamentary election closed, one of the oldest media houses in the country advised its employees that their salaries would be delayed by at least five days - something earlier unheard of at the organisation, in stark contrast to other media groups that routinely delay salaries for multiple months.

If the traditional media's internal struggles exacerbate the decline of its influence, it is unlikely to be missed by the public. The Sri Lankan population has embraced social media as perhaps its main mode of communication, and the onus now is on journalists to reinvent themselves for new times.△

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