



Sri Lanka Media Audience Study 2019:

Consuming News in Turbulent Times

November 2020



Consuming News in Turbulent Times: Sri Lanka Media Audience Study 2019

Published in Sri Lanka by International Media Support (IMS)

Authors:

Nalaka Gunawardene

With inputs from Arjuna Ranawana

Advisers:

Ranga Kalansooriya, PhD

Emilie Lehmann-Jacobsen, PhD

Lars Thunø

Infographics:

Nalin Balasuriya

Dharshana Karunathilake

Photos:

Nisal Baduge

Niroshan Fernando

© November 2020 IMS

The content of this publication is copyright protected. International Media Support is happy to share the text in the publication under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a summary of this license, please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>.



IMS is a non-profit organisation working to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition. IMS has engaged Sri Lanka through partners since 2003.

www.mediasupport.org

Contents

	Executive summary	5
1.	Introduction	10
2.	Methodology	13
	2.1 Data collection	13
	2.1.1 Phase I: Qualitative Phase	13
	2.1.2 Phase II: Quantitative Phase	14
	2.2 Study limitations	15
3.	Findings	16
	3.1 Value of news: How important is news and current information?	16
	3.2 What qualities do audiences want to see in news coverage?	19
	3.3 News sources: A mix of mass media, social media and non-media	21
	3.3.1 Television dominates across all demographics, everywhere	22
	3.3.2 Radio comes second, but listening patterns vary	23
	3.3.3 Inter-personal information sharing still matters	23
	3.3.4 Newspapers no longer a dominant news source	26
	3.3.5 Internet use keeps rising, but gender and other gaps remain	28
	3.3.6 Social media dominates as sources of news online	31
	3.3.7 Gossip websites outmaneuvering online journalism?	33
	3.4 How much do audiences trust their news sources?	35
	3.5 Audiences devising their own verification strategies	38
	3.6 Geography shapes news media use and audience perceptions	41
	3.7 Perceived biases in the news	43
	3.8 News consumption in times of crisis: Easter Sunday terror attacks of April 2019	46
	3.9 Social Media blocking in times of crisis	49
	3.10 What do audiences think of media freedom and access to information?	52
4.	Conclusion	55
5.	Recommendations	57

Annex	Qualities audiences wish to see in news coverage	60
Box 1:	Audiences are critical of 'Trial by Media'	20
Box 2:	Oral traditions co-existing with modern media	24
Box 3:	How many internet users are there in Sri Lanka?	29
Figure 1:	Overview of study hypotheses and their evaluations	6
Figure 2:	Administrative map of Sri Lanka	9
Figure 3:	Survey sample characteristics	14
Figure 4:	Distribution of survey sample across 9 provinces (25 administrative districts)	15
Figure 5:	Level of importance of news and current information	16
Figure 6:	What kind of news are audiences interested in?	17
Figure 7:	Sources of news and current information	20
Figure 8:	Regularly watched television channels cited by those who turn to TV for news	22
Figure 9:	Regularly followed radio channels cited by those who listen to radio for news	23
Figure 10:	Word of mouth or inter-personal communication remains a major source of news and current information	25
Figure 11:	Regularly read newspapers as cited by those who still turn to print for news	27
Figure 12:	Devices used to connect to the internet by internet users among responders	28
Figure 13:	Internet use in Sri Lanka as revealed by the survey	30
Figure 14:	Use of social media and messaging services	31
Figure 15:	Gossip websites cited by survey respondents who acknowledged turning to them regularly for news	33
Figure 16:	Level of use, preference and trust in news sources (media and non-media)	37
Figure 17:	How audiences perceive bias in media-based news sources	43
Figure 18:	State owned broadcasters are seen as more biased than privately owned ones	44
Figure 19:	Where survey respondents first heard the news, cross-checked and then mostly used as a source in the aftermath of Easter Sunday terror attacks on 21 April 2019	48
Figure 20:	Impact of temporary social media blocking in Sri Lanka in April and May 2019	49
Figure 21:	Audience views on the importance of media freedom and its prevalence	52
Figure 22:	Audience views on the importance of access to information and its prevalence	53

Executive summary

Sri Lanka's population of nearly 22 million people receive their news and current information from a variety of sources that includes the legacy media (television, radio and newspapers), web-based media as well as inter-personal communications. In recent years both media sources and communications devices have proliferated, yet there is limited information in the public domain about how Sri Lankans access, consume and interact with news.

In 2019, IMS International Media Support commissioned an audience study to better understand how people from different geographical, demographic, cultural and educational backgrounds in Sri Lanka consume news and current information. More specifically, the study investigated: concepts of news as understood by media audiences; news consumption habits of Sri Lankans; public trust levels in news sources; the role social media plays in information flows; and media and information literacy levels.

The study was designed with both a qualitative and a quantitative component, and it tested four broad hypotheses linked to the gradual shift from legacy media to digital and web-based media that Sri Lanka is experiencing similar to most other countries. A total of 222 persons (110 men and 112 women) were involved in 28 focus group discussions held between mid-March and early April 2019 in Colombo, Galle, Jaffna, Kandy and Kurunegala districts. Findings from this qualitative phase informed the design of a survey questionnaire that was physically administered to 2,014 persons -- men and women in equal proportions, representative of all socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, and in ages from 15 to 65. Respondents drawn from all 25 districts were surveyed during September and October 2019.

Based on the study findings, the hypotheses stand evaluated as shown in Figure 1 (details are given in section 4):

Highlights of the study findings (all of which are detailed in section 3):

- Across various demographics, Sri Lankan audiences highly value news and current information. More than three quarters (77%) identified news as being very important, and another 18% said it was somewhat important.
- National news on current affairs had the highest level of audience interest (76%), followed by national politics, local current affairs, national level entertainment news, national weather, local politics and national level sports. There was limited interest in economic and business news, and even less in international news.
- Audiences have a good sense of what good journalism means to them. Among the many attributes of good journalism highlighted by participants were: trustworthy, evidence-based information; clear and accurate; timely and relevant; balanced and unbiased reporting with a sufficient level of detail; respecting privacy; drawing from multiple sources; ethical use of sensitive visuals; and never advocating racism or violence.
- Most people turn to two, three or four news sources on a regular basis apparently to guard against being misled by media biases and manipulation.

Evaluation of Hypotheses based on study findings





Hypothesis	Validity	Reasons as revealed by study findings
H1: Media consumers in Sri Lanka have low levels of trust in the mainstream media and typically refer to multiple sources to verify news and current affairs related information	 PARTLY PROVED	Higher trust levels are seen for some legacy media (domestic TV news being the most trusted). High awareness of media biases. Many media users routinely turn to multiple sources to verify news and current info.
H2: Media consumers in Sri Lanka increasingly prefer social media (and Facebook in particular) as a source of news and current information	 REJECTED	Television remains the most widely and regularly used source for news (96%), followed by radio (55%), word of mouth (54%), newspapers (39%) and social media (31%).
H3: Media consumers in Sri Lanka find it difficult to critically reflect on social media content, leaving room for disinformation and misinformation to spread rapidly	 PROVED	Comparatively higher distrust levels for social media compared to the legacy media. Users refer multiple sources to verify content.
H4: There are age, gender and geographic variables in how people in Sri Lanka consume mass media and social media content [for news]	 PROVED	Media consumption for news does vary by age, geography and gender - but male/female responses are not too different to most questions. Gender differences are more prominent in social media use.

Figure 1: Overview of study hypotheses and their evaluations

- When it comes to news consumption, television is the most widely followed regular source of news, and also the most preferred and most trusted news media: across all demographics, 96% regularly watch domestic television channels for news.
- Radio comes second, but listening patterns vary. It is more followed (for news) by middle aged or senior citizens, and those in rural areas.
- Next to television and radio, respondents cited 'word of mouth' as their regular source of news. It shows how inter-personal information sharing still matters much in this era of mass media and social media proliferation.
- Newspapers are no longer a key news source: only 39% use newspapers regularly for news. This low interest is seen across gender, age and geographical divides.
- As internet use increases, it is changing how people perceive news and current information, as well as how they consume it. Four out of 10 persons use internet for news: most (93%) use their own smartphone to go online.
- Social media dominates as sources of news online: 31% respondents said they regularly get news from social media, while the use of gossip websites and other websites was cited by far fewer (8% and 3% respectively).
- Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Sri Lanka, used by 80% of internet users. It is followed by YouTube, IMO, WhatsApp, Viber and Instagram. Twitter and TikTok also have a more modest following.

- Besides using global social media platforms, 13% of all men and 10% of all women said they get news from “gossip sites”. With their clickbait headlines, sensationalist content and visually appealing multi-media offerings, such sites draw considerable traffic.
- As many as 84% survey respondents cited television as their most trusted source of news. Trust in all other news sources lags behind by a huge margin, but that does not mean that people have no trust in such media overall, but when asked to select a medium they trust more than others, television clearly triumphs.
- Some people have come up with their own informal practices to verify news – such as cross-checking with at least one other source, or comparing how the same story is covered by state and private broadcast channels. Audiences are also learning to be wary of what is shared on social media, especially at times when community tensions are running high.
- Geography shapes news media use and audience perceptions. More than the urban and rural divide, there seems to be a regional divide: residents in the Northern and Eastern provinces -- where the Tamil language is dominant -- consume news in ways different to the rest of the country.
- Audiences differentiate between private media and state media. The perceived credibility of state media is lower than that of private media. Only 9% felt state media is unbiased compared to 28% who felt private media is unbiased.



The survey questionnaire also probed news consumption patterns in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Sunday multiple terror attacks on 21 April 2019. Contrary to popular assumption, most Sri Lankans did not flock to social media or online outlets for breaking news. Instead, television was the most preferred media – it was also where two thirds first heard about the attacks. One out of five first heard about it from other persons while only one out of 20 learnt about it on social media (except for those aged 15 to 24 among whom 15% first heard it through social media or instant messaging).

Finally, the study looked at public perceptions on media freedom and access to information. Key findings were as follows:

- Almost 7 out of 10 respondents considered media freedom as very important, while 23% found it slightly important. More than half (56%) thought there is some level of media freedom in the country, while 36% felt there is full media freedom.
- Over two thirds (68%) consider access to information as very important. For another 24% it is slightly important. While 39% believed information was already accessible, another 54% said information was somewhat accessible.

At a time of rapid transformation in the media sector, it is crucial for media policy makers, media owners, media professionals and media activists to better understand how audiences perceive news and current information, in what different ways content is consumed, and how much – or how little – audiences trust their sources of news.

This report provides some of the answers to these questions but more research is needed to better understand Sri Lankan audiences and track their media consumption patterns in a media environment that keeps changing.





Figure 2: Administrative map of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka Media Audience Study 2019:

Consuming news in turbulent times



1. Introduction

Sri Lanka's modern mass media have been evolving for nearly two centuries. The first newspaper in English was launched in 1832, followed by newspapers in Tamil (1841) and Sinhala (1860). Radio broadcasting commenced in 1925 and television broadcasting arrived relatively late, in 1979. The broadcast sector remained a state monopoly until the early 1990s when chosen local private companies were allowed to enter the market.

Especially since 1990, Sri Lanka's media landscape has expanded rapidly in terms of publishers, content diversity, audience reach and advertiser base. The introduction of mobile telephony in 1989 and commercial internet services in 1995 enabled new ways of media production, delivery and audience engagement.

Today, numerous media outlets publishing print, broadcast or online content in three languages – Sinhala, Tamil and English -- compete for the attention of nearly 22 million citizens.¹ They also compete intensely among themselves for advertising and sponsorship revenue which is the main (or only) income source for many companies. With over 50 FM radio channels, around 20 terrestrial TV channels, dozens of newspapers and hundreds of news and gossip websites, Sri Lanka's media market is

overcrowded and, in certain respects, under-regulated.²

Sri Lanka's Media Development Indicator (MDI) report, the most comprehensive assessment of the sector published in May 2016, noted how the media industry and journalism profession are under many pressures ranging from unpredictable market forces and rapid technological advancements to an overbearing state and a decline in public trust levels.

As the report said, "The economic sustainability of media houses and businesses remains a major challenge. The mainstream media as a whole is struggling to retain its consumer base. Several factors have contributed to this. Many media houses have been slow in integrating digital tools and web-based platforms. As a result, there is a growing gulf between media's production models and their audiences' consumption patterns."³

This study was commissioned precisely to understand that gulf by mapping media audiences' news perceptions and media preferences. Systematically gathered data and independent analysis on media consumption and audience behaviour are not readily available in the public domain, especially with sufficient granularity and based on large enough samples.

With over 50 FM radio channels, around 20 terrestrial TV channels, dozens of newspapers and hundreds of news and gossip websites, Sri Lanka's media market is overcrowded and... under-regulated.

-
- 1 Digital media outlets also cater to over 2 million members of Sri Lankan diasporas scattered around the world.
 - 2 Mediasaurus meets media startups: who survives? Echelon magazine, October 2019. <https://www.echelon.lk/mediasaurus-meets-media-startups-who-survives/>
 - 3 Rebuilding Public Trust: An Assessment of the Media Industry and Profession in Sri Lanka. NSMR and IMS, Colombo, May 2016. <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/rebuilding-public-trust-assessment-media-industry-profession-sri-lanka/>

Many media houses in Sri Lanka know very little about their audiences and few have the competencies to gather the necessary information that could help them produce relevant audience studies. While the two state broadcasters have audience research units for just that purpose, their work does not seem to feed into content planning. Audiences, it seems, are often presumed to be one large and amorphous entity.

The reality is far more complex and nuanced, something that market research companies know well. They track media consumption patterns systematically for guiding their clients (most of them high-volume advertisers), but these findings are not public. Details of Sri Lanka's two broadcast ratings systems are also available only to subscribers. In any case, some radio and TV channels contest broadcast ratings alleging serious methodological flaws; a government appointed expert committee in 2017 recommended setting up an independent monitoring body with multi-stakeholder participation (it has not happened up to the time of writing).⁴

Academics or civil society groups conduct occasional media studies by using small samples or covering a limited geographical area. Such studies are not representative of the diversity and complexity of the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Sri Lankan media audience.

It was against the above backdrop that International Media Support (IMS) commissioned the current study on the consumption of news and current affairs information by media audiences

in Sri Lanka. The main objective was to better understand the media consumption habits of people from different geographical, demographic and educational backgrounds. The study was also expected to provide a clearer idea of Sri Lankans' concept of news, as well as insights into their media and information literacy levels.

This study falls into the category of demand-side research, i.e. studies that look downstream from the producers toward product markets and consumers, to map and understand how a product or service is received, used and trusted.

The study has yielded many findings that would be of interest to media managers and media researchers in terms of audiences' perceptions of news and how they understand and react to media brands and content.

Highlights of findings are presented in this report in different sections ranging from media preferences and audience trust in media to linguistic biases and emerging trends. A few quotes captured during interviews and focus group discussions are also shared, all anonymized.⁵

It is hoped that this study would be useful to policy makers, media researchers, media activists, and media professionals to devise better strategies for media content design, delivery and audience engagement. Media companies and media industry bodies can benefit from these findings to discuss how to remain relevant in the face of evolving audience perceptions and behaviour patterns.

4 Broadcast Ratings Get A Closer Look. Echelon magazine, August 2017. <https://www.echelon.lk/broadcast-ratings-get-a-closer-look/>

5 This report captures only the key findings. The full analysis as well as the dataset can be shared on request with interested media researchers and media houses.

2. Methodology

The study set out to probe the following aspects of audience attitudes and behaviours in relation to Sri Lanka's legacy media and digital media:

- concepts of news as understood by media audiences;
- news media consumption habits of Sri Lankans;
- public trust levels in various news and current information sources;
- the role of social media in information flows; and
- media and information literacy levels.

To guide the study, the study team defined four hypotheses to be verified or refuted:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Media consumers in Sri Lanka have low levels of trust in the legacy media, and typically refer to multiple sources to verify news and current information.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Media consumers in Sri Lanka increasingly prefer social media (and Facebook in particular) as a source of news and current information.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Media consumers in Sri Lanka find it difficult to critically reflect on social media content, leaving room for disinformation and misinformation to spread rapidly.
- **Hypothesis 4:** There are age, gender and geographic variables in how people in Sri Lanka consume legacy media and social media content (in terms of news).

The above hypotheses are grounded in the fact that, like many other countries, Sri Lanka too is

experiencing a shift from legacy media to digital and web-based media.⁶ This shift -- driven by a combination of demographics, technology and market forces -- is a gradual process that could take decades to be completed, yet the trends are already clear.

To probe the research areas and test the hypotheses, the audience study was designed with both a qualitative and a quantitative component. The combination of a qualitative and a quantitative component makes it possible to get both deep insights of audiences' consumption habits and news concepts and test hypotheses on a representative sample of a given population. It was therefore decided to start with a qualitative phase to probe our theories in focus groups and in-depth interviews before designing and rolling out a nation-wide survey.

2.1 Data collection

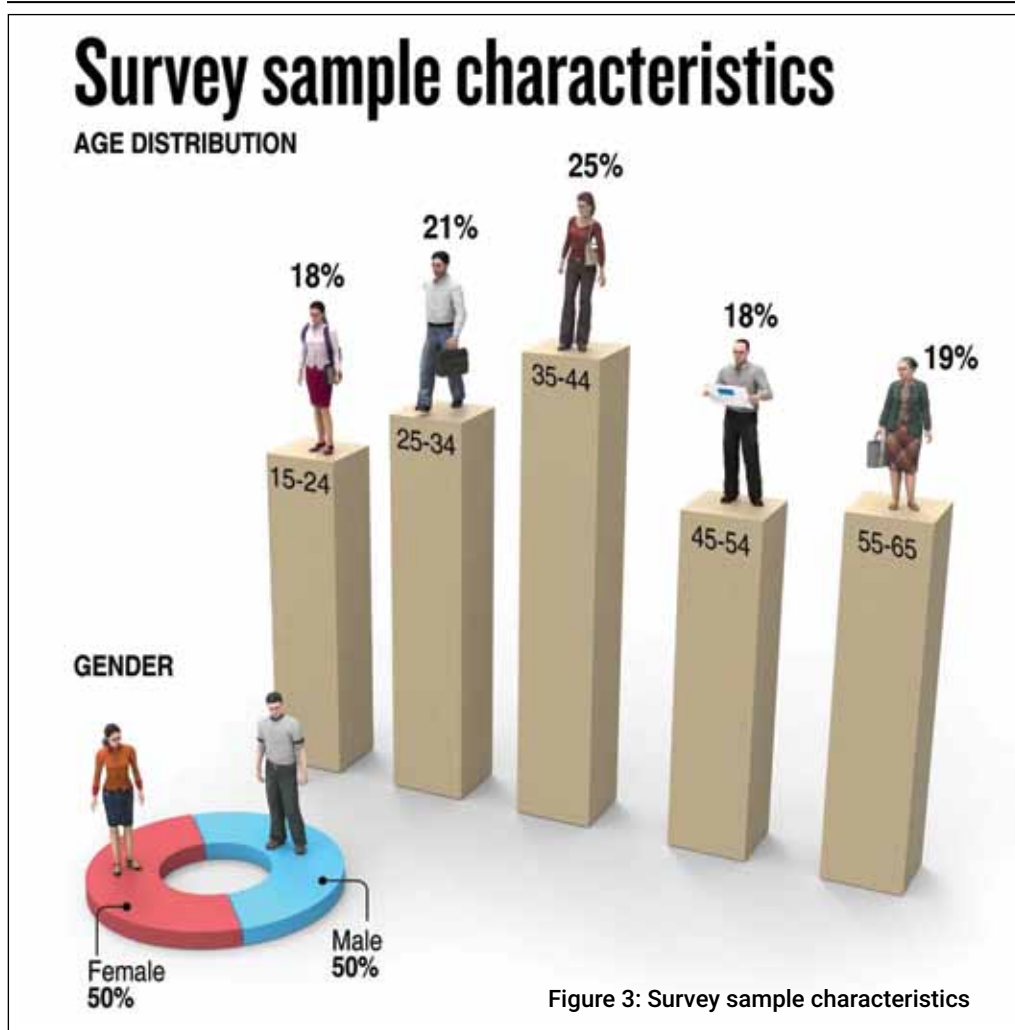
Data collection and preliminary analysis were done by a leading market research company in Sri Lanka.⁷ The company was competitively selected by IMS whose team in Sri Lanka and Denmark were involved in the study design and implementation. The study was locally led by Nalaka Gunawardene. Quality assurance and ongoing guidance were provided by Lars Thuno, a leading Danish expert in media audience studies, and IMS' in-house media researcher Emilie Lehmann-Jacobsen.

2.1.1 Phase I: Qualitative Phase

A total of 222 persons (110 men and 112 women) were involved in 28 focus group discussions held

⁶ Legacy media, also known as 'old media' are the mass media institutions that predominated prior to the Information Age -- particularly printed newspapers, film studios, music studios, advertising agencies, radio broadcasting, and television. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_media

⁷ The market research company asked not to be mentioned by name.



between mid-March and early April 2019. These were held in various locations in Colombo, Galle, Jaffna, Kandy and Kurunegala districts. Efforts were made to have all focus groups disaggregated by gender, age, socio-economic status and other relevant demographics, in order to better facilitate responses and capture differing views among genders and other populations. There was also a mix of internet users and non-users in each group.

Each focus group discussion lasted approximately two hours with discussions centered around topics such as ideal attributes associated with news, sources of news, reactions and reasons for using/not using the internet.

Following the data collection, the gathered information was analyzed and presented to IMS. Based on the findings from this phase, a survey was designed in collaboration between the market research company, IMS and audience study expert Lars Thunø.

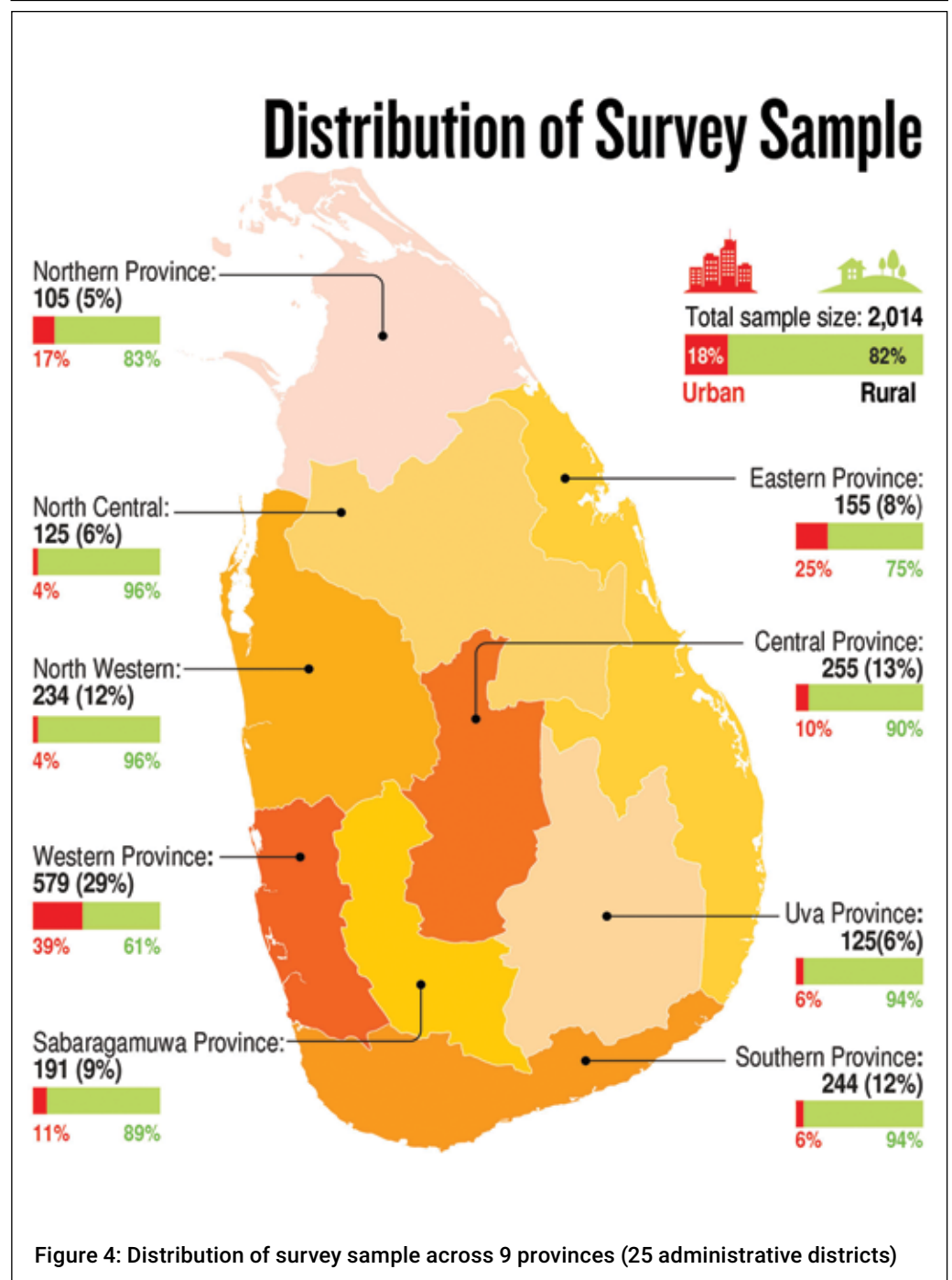
2.1.2 Phase II: Quantitative Phase

Data was collected through a survey questionnaire that was physically administered by

trained staff of the market research company. The total survey sample was 2,014 persons drawn from all 25 administrative districts: the district allocation was decided proportionate to the population in the last (2012) census, and participants were randomly selected. It involved men and women in equal proportions who were drawn from all socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. The age range was between 15 and 65. The field work was carried out during September and October 2019.

All participants took part voluntarily and in a language of their choice (Sinhala, Tamil or English). Their responses were recorded in good faith without further verification. All participants were informed about the purposes of the study prior to their participation and were asked for their informed consent. If no consent was given the participant was excluded from the research.

Both the focus group discussion and the questionnaire were piloted on smaller samples to minimise the risk of misinterpretation of exercises and questions. Only minor adjustments were made to the methodology after the pilot phases which mainly included rephrasing of questions and more detailed instructions to moderators and interviewers.



2.2 Study Limitations

Emphasis in this study has been on the factual content in the media: news, current affairs and analysis/opinions on current topics. However, participants were asked about their media consumption and preferences regardless of what sort of content they consumed.

We also wanted audiences to provide their own understanding of news, and not just go by predefined categories. During the 28 focus group discussions, considerable time was spent exploring what media audiences understood as news, and what they thought of the news they access in the legacy media and social media. Every attempt was made to cover all key

media brands in print and broadcast sectors. Respondents also had the option of naming any other media brands besides what was prompted in questions.

Finally, it is important to mention that the data collection for the audience study took place in 2019 – with the quantitative phase taking place prior to the Easter Sunday terror attacks and the qualitative phase taking place afterwards. It is quite common that people's media usage increase – and their habits are slightly altered – in a time of crisis. To accommodate this situation, additional questions on people's media habits following the attacks were added to the survey. The results from this part of the survey can be found in section 3.8.

3. Findings

3.1 Value of news: How important is news and current information?

Sri Lankan audiences value their news highly. More than three quarters (78%) of those who took part in the survey identified news and current information as being very important to their daily lives and another 18% said it was slightly important.

For a vast majority, consuming news has become a daily habit, with nearly all survey respondents affirming that it is important for them to be informed about what is happening in their community and country. As a housewife in Colombo who is an infrequent internet user stated during a focus group, “When we get up in the morning, we get to know [from news] that the prices of cooking gas, dhal and milk powder have gone up...”

Over 75% consider news and current info very important in their daily lives

Question: Can you please tell us the level of importance you give to News and Current Affairs in your day-to-day life?

Single answer to be chosen from among four options



Base: Total respondents 2,014

Figure 5: Level of importance of news and current information

News and current affairs information helps them to keep up with unfolding situations and to prepare themselves to take necessary action or precautions. For instance, some felt they needed to be updated on crime so that they could safeguard their children.

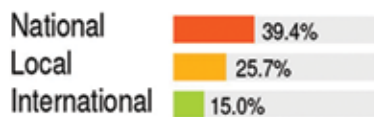
But news and current affairs may also help people to feel more knowledgeable. One working man from urban Kandy explained during a focus group how he followed the news to more confidently engage in discussions with his friends. Similar sentiments were found during

What kind of news are audiences interested in ?

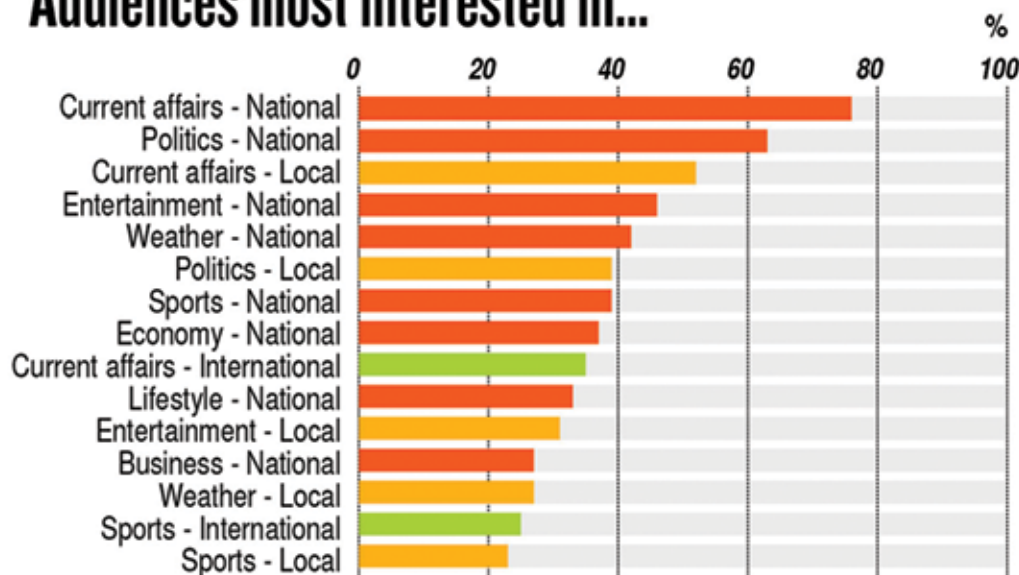
More people are interested in national level news on current affairs and politics

Base: All 2,014 Respondents

Overall interest in news category



Audiences most interested in...



Question:

By looking at the list can you please tell the news you are most interested in?

30 options in the list, in 3 categories: local, national and international; multiple selections allowed

Figure 6: What kind of news are audiences interested in?



the survey where more than half of respondents agreed with the statement that being updated with news enhances a person's social status.

Many recalled how they were gravely impacted when they did not get some key information. For example, from time to time citizens are caught unawares by wildcat strikes of transport workers, health workers or school teachers. Parents complained that when they took their children to school they found the schools closed as teachers were on strike. They believed this happened

because no one at home had followed the latest news.

“When we get up in the morning, we get to know [from news] that the prices of cooking gas, dhal and milk powder have gone up...”

- Housewife in urban Colombo

When it comes to which type of information, people are interested in, the survey showed a strong preference for national news (76%), followed by national politics (63%), local current affairs (52%), national level entertainment news (46%), national weather (42%), local politics and national level sports (39% each).⁸ There was limited interest in economic and business news, and even less in international news.

8 In a relatively small country like Sri Lanka, the distinction between local and national is often blurred.

3.2 What qualities do audiences want to see in news coverage?

In each focus group discussion held across Sri Lanka during March and April 2019, at least half an hour was spent discussing what participants felt were the ideal attributes associated with news and current information. Participants expressed these in their own words from which we have derived the attributes they appreciate.

Their comments (some of which have been summarized in the Annex) illustrate how audiences from many different backgrounds value the qualities of good journalism and how they are seeking more of it in their media. These values include, but are not limited to: trustworthy, evidence-based information; clear and accurate; timely and relevant; balanced and unbiased reporting with a sufficient level of detail; respecting privacy; drawing from multiple sources; ethical use of sensitive visuals; and never advocating racism or violence.

Participants also brought up what they consider

as negative qualities in news reporting. The long list included: lack of evidence; half-baked, superficial or incomplete reporting; inconsistency; lack of follow-up; failure to keep up with a story; excessive focus on politics and neglecting other topics of public interest; creating news out of non-news; reporting only problems and not solutions; targeting individuals for attack in news reporting; artificially dragging the same news for many days without justification; and overuse of a handful of chosen experts.

The desire for good journalism was expressed by people from all parts of the country, and from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Both men and women are vocal in their dissatisfaction with how news is covered and packaged by many sections of Sri Lanka's legacy media.

Women, in particular, seem to fault the media on violating the privacy of victims and for sensationalizing reporting. The concern is related to a tendency by some media to go beyond reporting and analyzing, and trying to pass judgement too (see Box 1).



BOX 1

Audiences are critical of 'Trial by Media'

Audiences are deeply concerned about media jumping ahead of police investigations and the judicial process when reporting on major crimes. Persons of interest or suspects questioned by investigators are often mis-identified as culprits in news reporting, thus violating their privacy, ruining personal reputations and sometimes triggering mob attacks on such individuals.

Such 'trial by media' came into sharp focus during the horrific case of Seya Sadewmi, a 4-year-old girl who was abducted from her home in Kotadeniyawa in the Gampaha District. Her body was later found 200 meters away from the house, and the autopsy revealed that she had been sexually assaulted and strangled to death. The crime dominated media headlines for days in September 2015.

When two suspects including a 17-year-old schoolboy were initially arrested, sections of the media quickly labelled them as guilty, before moving on to implicating a third suspect. All three were later exonerated by DNA testing, but by then media had labelled them as criminals.

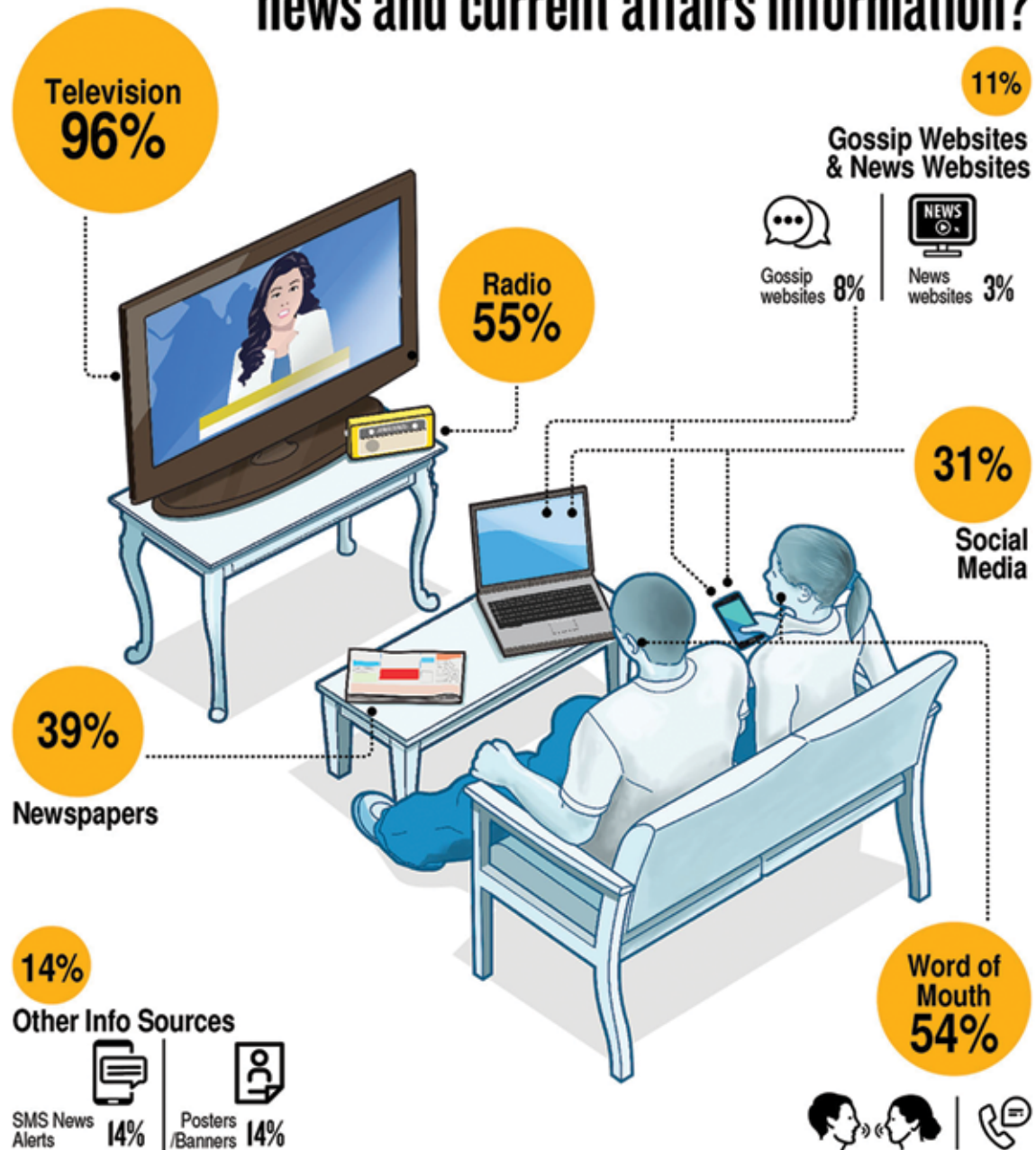
"Even though he was later proven innocent, we all thought he was guilty because of how it was reported," one participant said of the schoolboy suspect. The real murderer was later arrested, prosecuted with DNA and other evidence, and convicted to death in March 2016.

In other cases, media's sensationalism has got in the way of criminal investigations. Discerning audience members are critical of this run-away media conduct and call for restraint and ethical conduct.



Two front pages on 14 September 2015 show how Sinhala and English newspapers from the same publisher reported on the child murder incident

Where do Sri Lankans normally get their news and current affairs information?



Question: What type of media or source you normally use to get news and current information?
Answer list prompted; multiple selections allowed

Figure 7: Sources of news and current information

3.3 News sources: A mix of mass media, social media and non-media

Sri Lanka's news and current information landscape is diverse in sources, content and dissemination methods. People access and receive information from a variety of sources comprising mass media outlets, social media platforms, non-

media methods of hyper-local dissemination, and inter-personal communication.

In the survey, respondents were asked which media they normally use to get news and current affairs information (for which 13 potential sources were listed, including an option of naming other sources; multiple selections were allowed).

As seen in Figure 7, people routinely draw their current information from a multitude of sources.

Broadcast television and radio dominate but quite interestingly, the non-media source of word of mouth comes third – ahead of newspapers as well as all web-based sources.

Sources of news and information were also probed during focus group discussions. There were some differences in what was cited by frequent users of internet (FUIs) on the one hand, and infrequent users or non-users of internet (INUIs) on the other. In both categories local television channels were the most frequently mentioned as the source of news, but after that the responses differed.

3.3.1 Television dominates across all demographics, everywhere

Television is the most widely followed regular source of news and current information, and also the most preferred and most trusted news media according to survey respondents. As many as 96% said they regularly watch television for news (almost all of them through the TV receiver at home, with only 3% stating that they watch on a smartphone or tablet).

This heavy reliance on television is seen across all demographics – both men and women, those

living in urban as well as rural areas, and from all age groups.

Terrestrially distributed domestic television channels are also the kind of news media that audiences are most likely to consume on a daily basis. More than 9 out of 10 get their information on news and current affairs from television – indeed, a fifth of news consumers said they watched only television, foregoing all other media.

This makes popular privately-owned channels highly influential in shaping public opinion. During the time the survey was conducted (September – October 2019), privately owned Hiru TV and TV Derana were cited by 64% and 59% of all who watched television, followed by Swarnavahini (36%), Sirasa TV (32%) and state-owned ITN Sri Lanka (19%). The national broadcaster Rupavahini came sixth with 18% of those watching television citing it.

These rankings are different in the Northern Province and Eastern Province, where the most widely cited television channels are privately owned Shakthi TV and state owned Vasantham TV.

Regularly Watched TV Channels

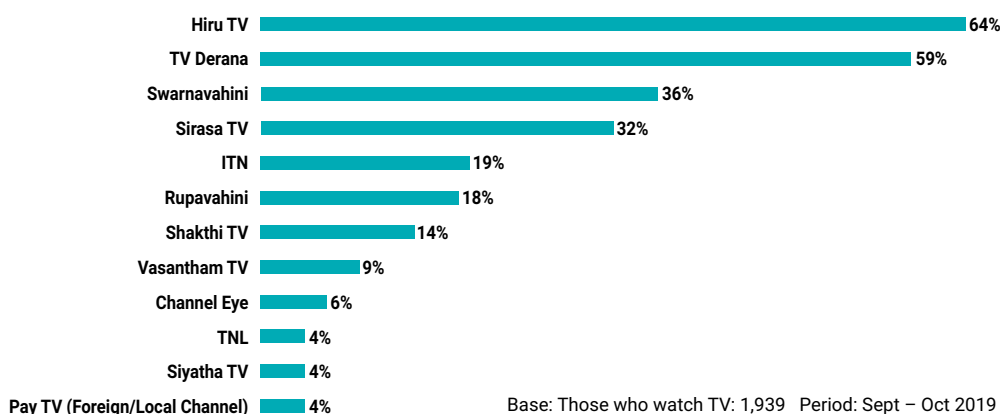
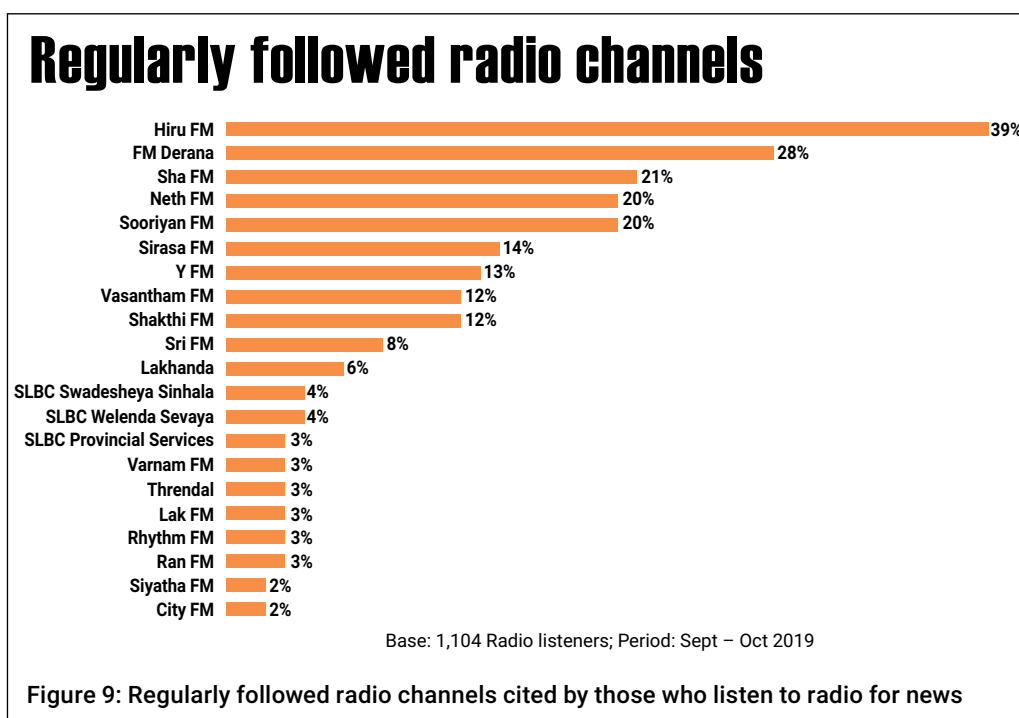


Figure 8: Regularly watched television channels cited by those who turn to TV for news



3.3.2 Radio comes second, but listening patterns vary

Radio comes in as a distant second (55%) as a source of news. Most (96%) among those who use the radio as a source of news, said they turn on the radio receiver at home, while very few do so through other methods, e.g. through a smartphone (3%) and shared listening at public places (2%). Although listening to car radio was among the answers prompted, a statistically insignificant number chose it.

When looking at age and geographical location, some differences emerge. Less than half of those aged 15 to 25 years listen to radio for news, but the proportion goes up with age: 6 out of 10 of those above 45 years do (for them, radio is one of 3 preferred news sources).

Radio listening is slightly more popular in rural areas than in the cities – a variance that was not observed in television viewership. Those in Southern, North-Western, North-Central,

Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces follow radio news more than in other provinces. Radio news is followed the least in the Northern (47%) and Western (45%) provinces.

Significantly, there was no difference between men and women in how they turn to the radio medium for news.

3.3.3 Inter-personal information sharing still matters

Next to television and radio, survey respondents cited ‘word of mouth’ as a regular source of news and current information – a noteworthy observation in the era of mass media and social media proliferation.

Word of mouth entails finding or verifying current information – in person or through voice telephone calls -- from family members, neighbours, friends, colleagues or relatives, as well as from local level authority figures such as priests, policemen, teachers, midwives and

BOX 2

Oral traditions co-existing with modern media

Sri Lankans have been avid story tellers for millennia. The island nation has a rich repository of narratives and narrative styles in the written and oral traditions. In the twenty-first century, both co-exist in evolved forms.

Given this history, it is not surprising that word of mouth remains a key information sharing practice even today. A vast amount of fact, fiction and in-between content is passed on from person to person, ranging from utilitarian information and political gossip to community satire and superstition.

However, the quality and integrity of information transmitted in this manner can vary enormously depending on individuals and circumstances. There is considerable room here for information to be degraded or corrupted – an aspect that merits closer scrutiny by those studying the spread of disinformation.

grama niladharis (grassroots tier of public administration). In rural areas, owners of local tea/coffee shops and travelling lottery sellers also become sources of news.

Some patterns about word of mouth have emerged from our survey:

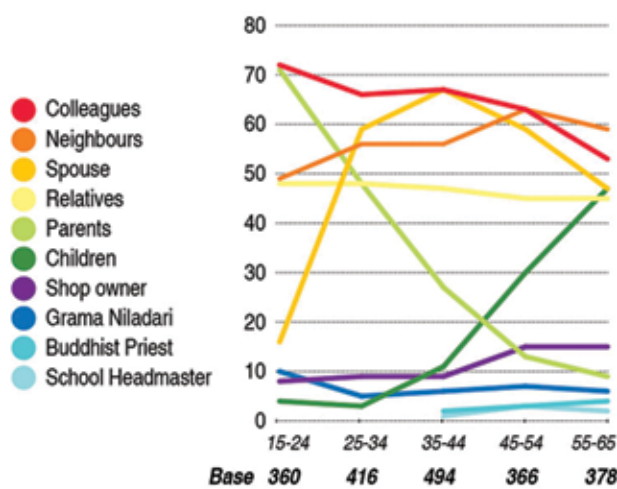
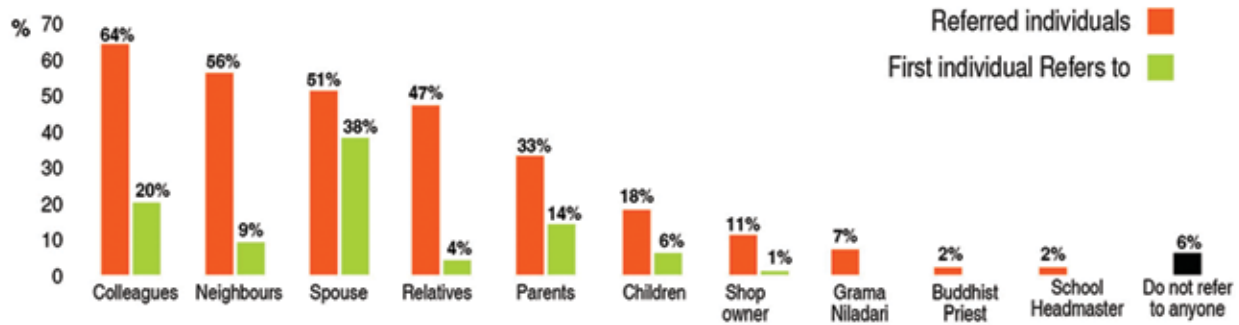
- Colleagues, neighbours, spouse, relatives and parents are the individuals most people turn to (in that order). This suggests the trust factor at work for the ‘inner circle’.
- More men (70%) ask their colleagues than do women (59%).⁹ More women ask their spouse (56%) compared to men (46%).
- When asked who the first person to receive or discuss news with, the choice was in this order: spouse (38%), colleagues (20%), parents (14%), neighbours (9%) and children (6%). Again, physical proximity seems to engender trust.
- Individual news sources like shop owners, *grama niladharis*, priests and school headmasters are tapped only sparingly. Their role in news flow has diminished today compared to 50 years ago, probably due to media sources spreading in communities.
- A small number (6%) in the sample said they don’t use word of mouth as a news source.

⁹ This could be because twice as many men in the working age participate in the labour force than women. Female labour force participation rate has remained between 30 and 35% during the past two decades, which is surprising given the high educational attainment levels and other social indicators of women in Sri Lanka. Factors analysed in this 2016 report: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms_551675.pdf

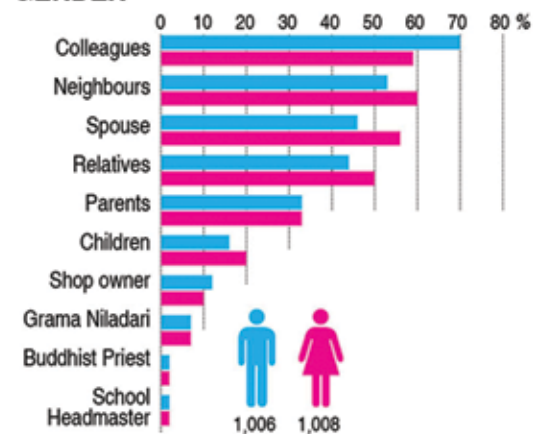
Word of Mouth: Individuals as sources of news & info

Colleagues, Neighbours, Spouse and Relatives are the ones people turn to regularly

Base: All 2,014 Respondents



GENDER



How different demographics rely on word of mouth to different extents.

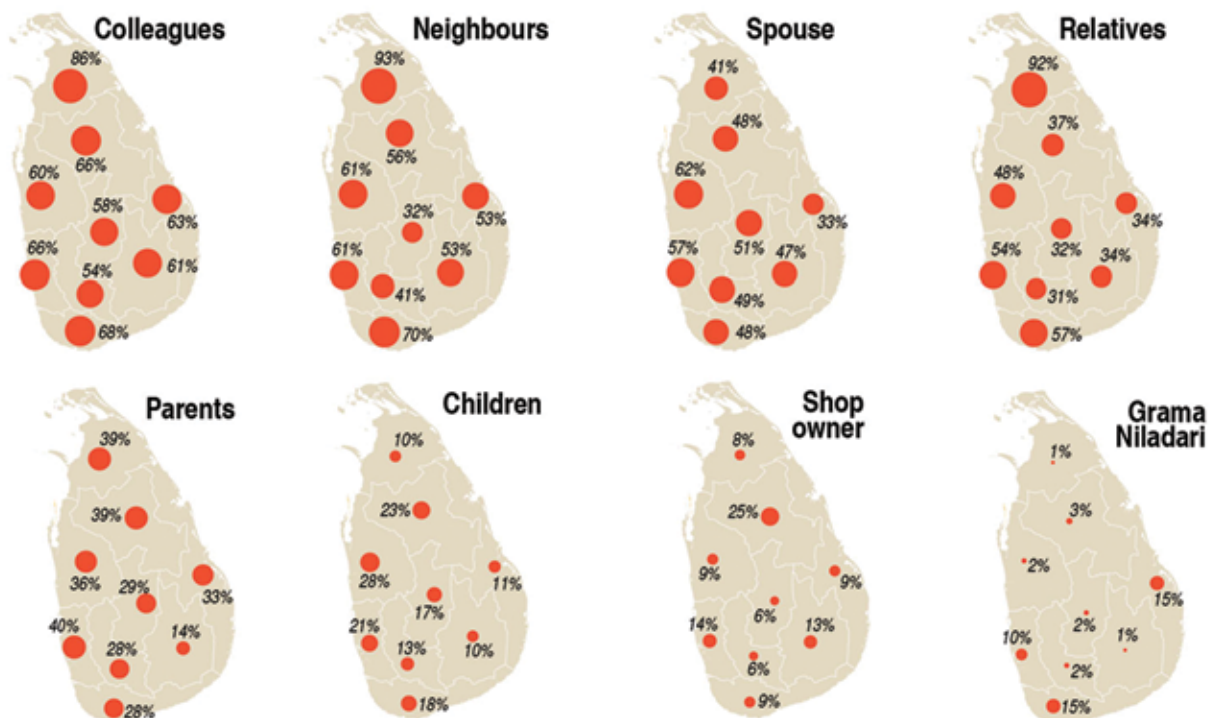


Figure 10: Word of mouth or inter-personal communication remains a major source of news and current information



3.3.4 Newspapers no longer a dominant news source

Of the full sample, only 39% said they use newspapers regularly as a news source. This low level is seen irrespective of gender, age and geographical factors.

Among the 800 respondents who still read newspapers (either every day or on weekends), 76% buy their own printed copy and 21% share somebody else's printed copy. The use of e-papers on newspaper websites was statistically insignificant.¹⁰

Some respondents (16% of those who cite newspapers as a regular source of news) follow newspaper headlines reading shows on local television channels.¹¹ This practice has become a popular morning segment on television: presenters of such shows sometimes add their own opinions to the featured newspaper content – enabling them to influence public opinion.

Other notable insights emerging from the survey:

- Younger age groups (under 34 years) cite newspapers less as a regular source, while older age groups mention it more. Even then, the highest is 40% among those in 55 to 65 age group.
- Except in the Sabaragamuwa Province, where nearly six out of 10 people still read newspapers, every other place showed lower levels of newspaper use.
- Buying one's own newspaper is highest in the Central Province (90% among regular readers) and lowest in the Northern Province (44%), where sharing a newspaper is highest (77%, compared to below 30% in all other provinces).
- Slightly more women newspaper readers said they buy their own printed copy (80%) compared to 73% among men.

On the supply side, data shows that Sri Lanka's newspaper industry is in a slow decline. Printed newspaper circulation fell in both 2017 and 2018, with diminishing readership across all three languages. Annual circulation of daily

¹⁰ This might have changed somewhat during March to May 2020 period when Sri Lanka had a lockdown of 8 weeks to contain and control COVID-19, when newspaper printing stopped and only limited e-paper editions were published.

¹¹ Some daily or weekend national newspapers with limited circulation are exposed – even if only fleetingly – to a much larger television audience through this practice.

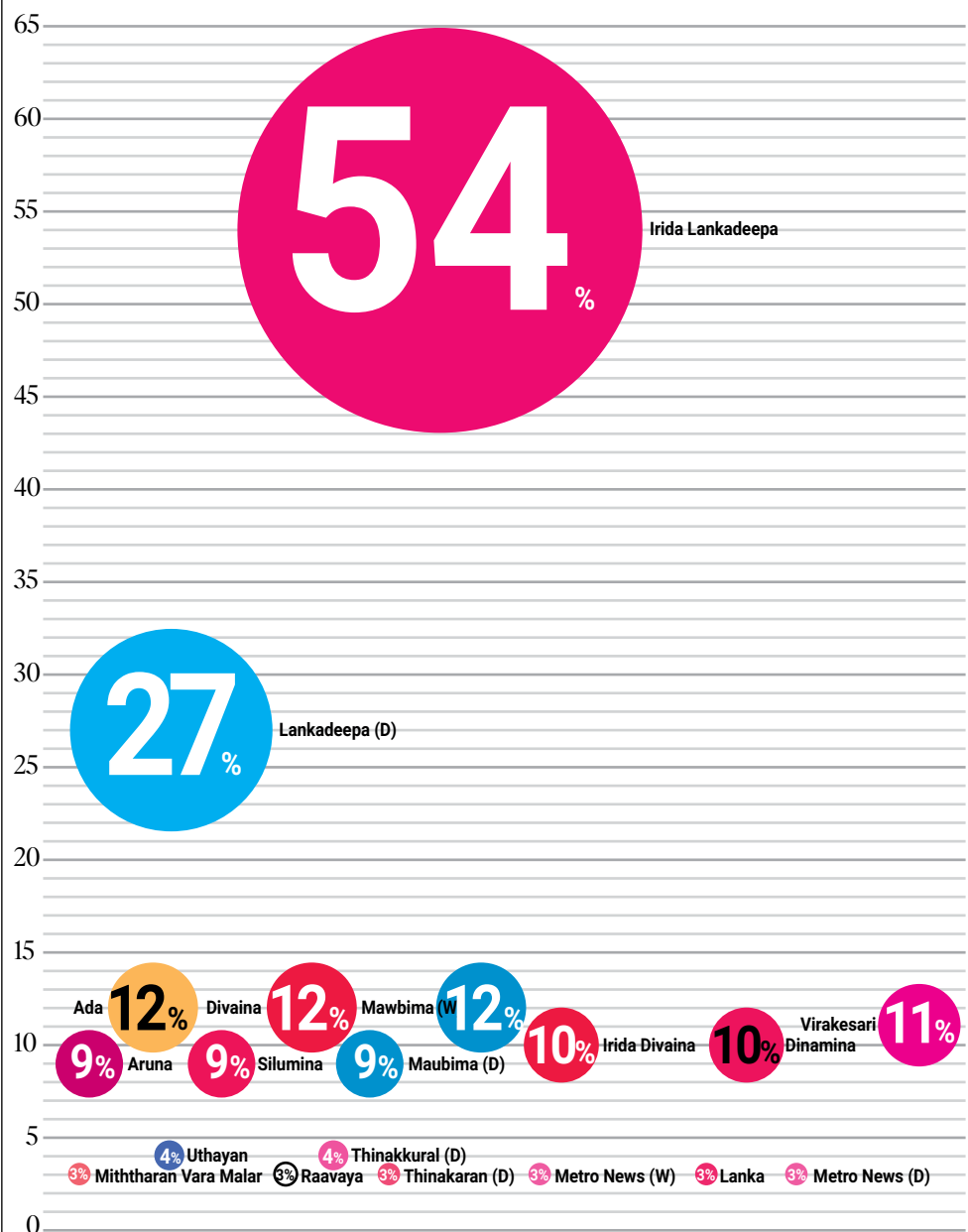
"We don't often read newspapers unless we are looking for a job. Newspapers are mostly used to wrap the rice packet (packed lunch), but if there is a picture of a beautiful girl, then we might look at it..."

**Working male,
Colombo**

"Elders prefer TV or newspapers, but youngsters always ask for the Rs. 49 data package and look at Facebook..."

**Female senior citizen
in rural Galle**

Regularly read Newspapers



Base: 800 Newspaper readers; In Sept – Oct 2019

Figure 11: Regularly read newspapers as cited by those who still turn to print for news

national newspapers fell to 368 million in 2018, down from 398.7 million a year earlier, after reaching a historical peak of 411.8 million in

2016, while weekly newspaper circulation fell to 113.3 million in 2018 after peaking at 136.3 million in 2017.¹²

¹² This data was collated by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka based on self-declared statistics from newspaper publishers and the Ministry of Mass Media and published in the article "Sri Lanka newspaper circulation falls for second straight year", EconomyNext.com, 20 August 2019. <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-newspaper-circulation-falls-for-second-straight-year-15163/>

Devices Used to Connect to Internet

A vast majority goes online through own smartphone; minimal reliance on others' or shared devices

Question: How do you connect to internet?

12 answer options were prompted, and multiple selections allowed

Base: 797 Internet Users

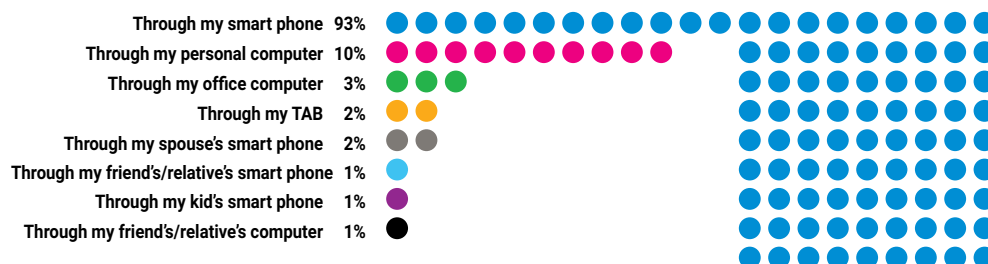


Figure 12: Devices used to connect to the internet by internet users among responders

3.3.5 Internet use keeps rising, but gender and other gaps remain

As internet use rises in Sri Lankan society, it is changing how people perceive news and current information, and the ways in which they consume it.

For several years after commercial internet services were first introduced in 1995, Sri Lanka's internet use was limited to cities and higher income groups, and local content was sparse. It took 17 years before the number of subscribers reached 1 million (in 2012). Since then, user numbers have grown much faster thanks to the introduction of mobile broadband (in 2009), the popularity of social media and the proliferation of locally relevant content in local languages. By 2015, most estimates placed the number of internet users at around 25% of the total population.

The total number of internet users in the country keeps growing and estimates vary depending on the data sources and interpretations (see Box 3 for details). Responses to our survey, done in late 2019, found 40% of the full sample saying they use internet.

Some patterns emerge from this data:

- A clear gender divide in internet use: 46% of all men go online, but only 33% of women report doing so.
- Younger persons are much more likely to go online, with the 15-to-24 age group leading (57%) followed by those between 25 and 34 (59%). Usage declines sharply with increasing age.
- City dwellers go online more than their rural counterparts (50% to 37%).
- Geographically, the highest internet use for news is from the Eastern Province (65%), followed by Northern Province (57%) and Western Province (42%). This may be because the Western Province is where most print and broadcast media houses are concentrated (in and around Colombo city) and residents have easier access to other information sources.

A few extra questions were posed to the 797 internet users about how they go online for news and current information.

- Asked how they go online, 93% said they use their own smartphone. Another 10% cited own personal computer (laptop/desktop), and 3% an office computer. Use of tablets or borrowing devices of spouse or friends were cited by very few users.

- Overall, 65% said they go online on a daily basis; another 12% do so 5 to 6 times a week.

BOX 3

How many internet users are there in Sri Lanka?

By end 2019, Sri Lanka had three fixed phone operators and four mobile phone operators all of who were providing internet services, and additionally there were suppliers of specialized data services. According to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) that collates industry data, there were 1,654,174 fixed broadband subscriptions and 11,754,166 mobile broadband subscriptions when 2019 ended, i.e. a total of 13,408,340.¹³ The mid-2019 official population projection was 21.803 million.

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka's Annual Report 2019 (which offers a data-driven analysis of the state of the economy) appears to have used these figures when it says internet penetration stood at 61.5 per 100 persons by end 2019. By the same date, there were 150.8 active mobile phone subscriptions per 100 persons.¹⁴ Other data analysts place the total internet user number to be closer to 50% of population. We Are Social, a global service that tracks digital transformation trends, estimated 47% of Sri Lanka's population being online by end 2019.¹⁵

These aggregated, supply-side data is not sufficient to understand how people use internet. To probe that, the Colombo-anchored tech thinktank LIRNEasia has been conducting demand-side studies on how people access and use information and communications technologies (ICTs) in emerging Asian economies including Sri Lanka. Their 2018-19 survey – part of a 23-country research initiative named AfterAccess -- involved 2,017 households from 100 grama niladhari divisions across the nine provinces in Sri Lanka. It has given interesting granular-level insights.

Among those surveyed in the age range of 15 to 65 years, 78% said they owned a mobile phone (an active mobile SIM and a device). But less than half (47%) had a smartphone (defined as a phone using an operating system such as Android or iOS, through which third party 'apps' could be run, and with a touch screen covering at least 75% of its front area). When it came to internet use, only 37% of AfterAccess sample self-reported as going online. Overall, 76% of those owning internet-enabled mobile phones said they used apps, the most popular ones being social media (Facebook, Instagram), instant messaging (WhatsApp) and voice (Skype).¹⁶

13 Telecommunications Regulatory Commission official data, December 2019. http://www.trc.gov.lk/images/pdf/statistics_q4_03032020.pdf

14 Central Bank of Sri Lanka: Annual Report 2019 https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/publications/annual_report/2019/en/7_Chapter_03.pdf

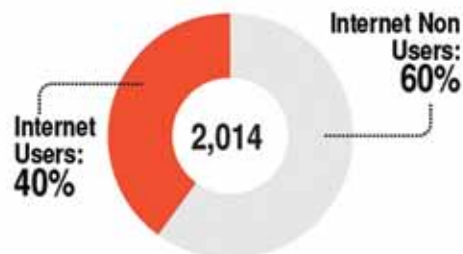
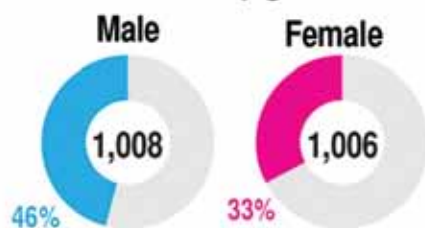
15 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-sri-lanka>

16 Details found at: <https://afteraccess.net/> and <https://lirneasia.net/>

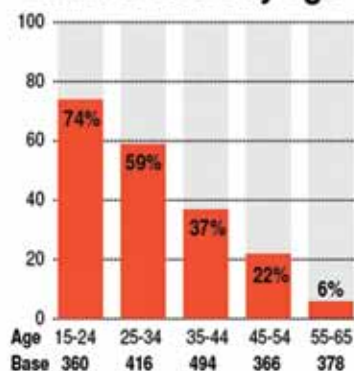
How internet use varies in Sri Lanka

Base: All 2,014 Respondents
Internet Users: 797
Internet use around 40% of sample.
Survey done in Sep-Oct 2019

Internet users by gender



Internet users by Age



Higher use reported among:
Men, younger ages (15-34 years),
city dwellers + in Northern
& Eastern Provinces



Figure 13: Internet use in Sri Lanka as revealed by the survey

3.3.6 Social media dominates as sources of news online

Our study was limited to probing how Sri Lankans look for news and current information when they go online.

In the survey questionnaire, the full sample of 2,014 was asked about their regular sources of news and information. The collated responses

included: social media 31%, gossip websites 8% and other websites 3%.

The subset of 797 respondents who said they are regular internet users was further questioned about their use of social media as well as gossip websites.

Social media use dominates the internet experience for news. A number of global

Use of Social Media Platforms & Messaging Services

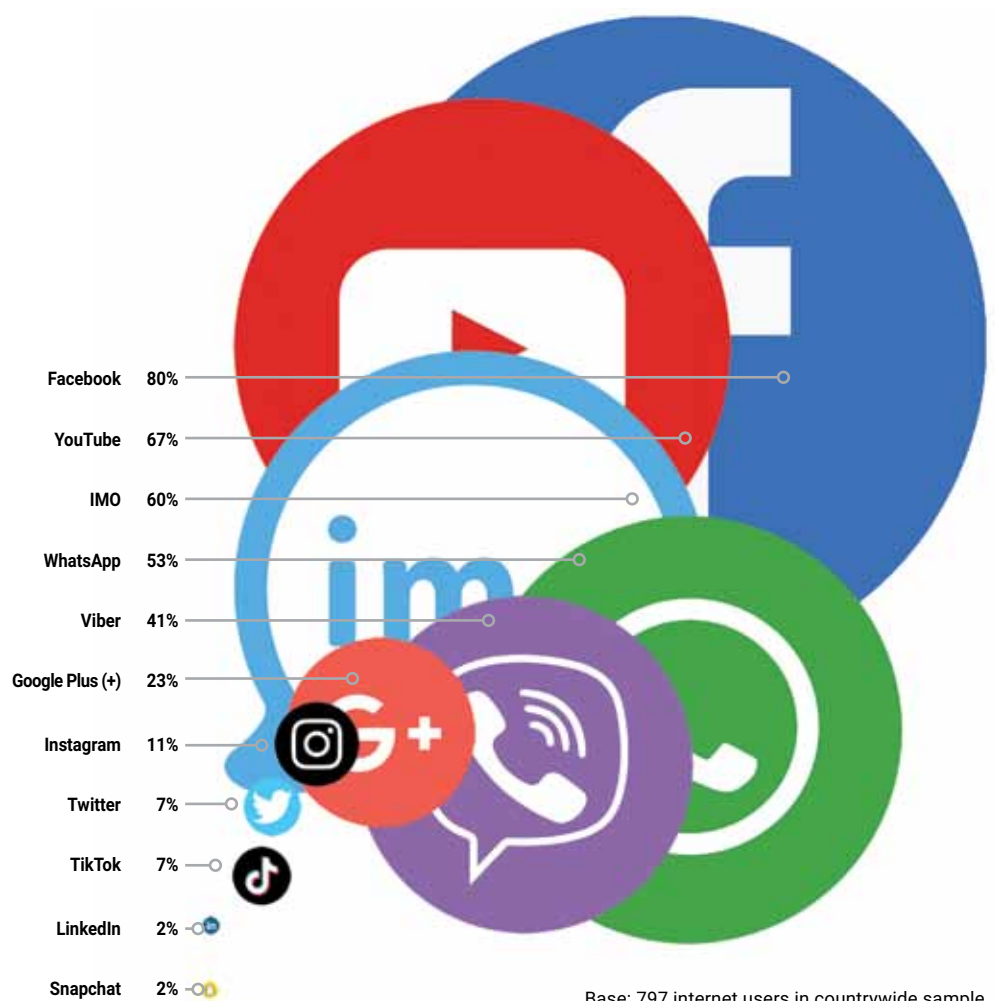


Figure 14: Use of social media and messaging services

social media platforms and instant messaging services are being used in Sri Lanka. Facebook, the most popular among them, was cited by 80% of internet users. It was followed by YouTube (67%), IMO (60%), WhatsApp (53%), Viber (41%) and Instagram (11%). Twitter and TikTok were both cited by 7% of the time, while LinkedIn and SnapChat was liked by 2% each.

A few noteworthy findings:

- More men (86%) said they used Facebook as a news source than did women (71%). There

is no significant gender disparity in the use of other services.

- Those in rural areas cited Facebook slightly more (81%) than those in the cities (75%).
- WhatsApp use was reported by considerably more urban residents (76%) than rural ones (46%).
- Instagram use was cited more by younger respondents and those living in cities.

"We like social media as we can get lots of information in a short time and there are live and timely updates on accidents, polls, budgets, etc."

Housewife in urban Kurunegala, frequent internet user

"We want to improve ourselves and be knowledgeable, so we constantly look for information on social media...also now it is a hobby..."

Working male in urban Jaffna, frequent internet user

"We don't use social media because anyone can say/post anything on Facebook and there is no one to take any responsibility for it...even on Nittawo, people just created stories and made a big fuss..."

Working male in rural Kegalle, Non-user of internet



3.3.7 Gossip websites outmaneuvering online journalism?

Besides using global social media platforms for their news, some say they also access news via websites known as “gossip sites” in Sri Lanka. The numbers are modest (13% of all men and 10% of all women surveyed), so the specific

results need to be treated with caution.¹⁷ At the same time, these findings point to an audience trend worth watching.

Dozens of such gossip sites have emerged in recent years: they operate under their own domain names, publishing content in Sinhala, Tamil or English. They peddle a curious mix of celebrity scandals, sporting

Gossip website users

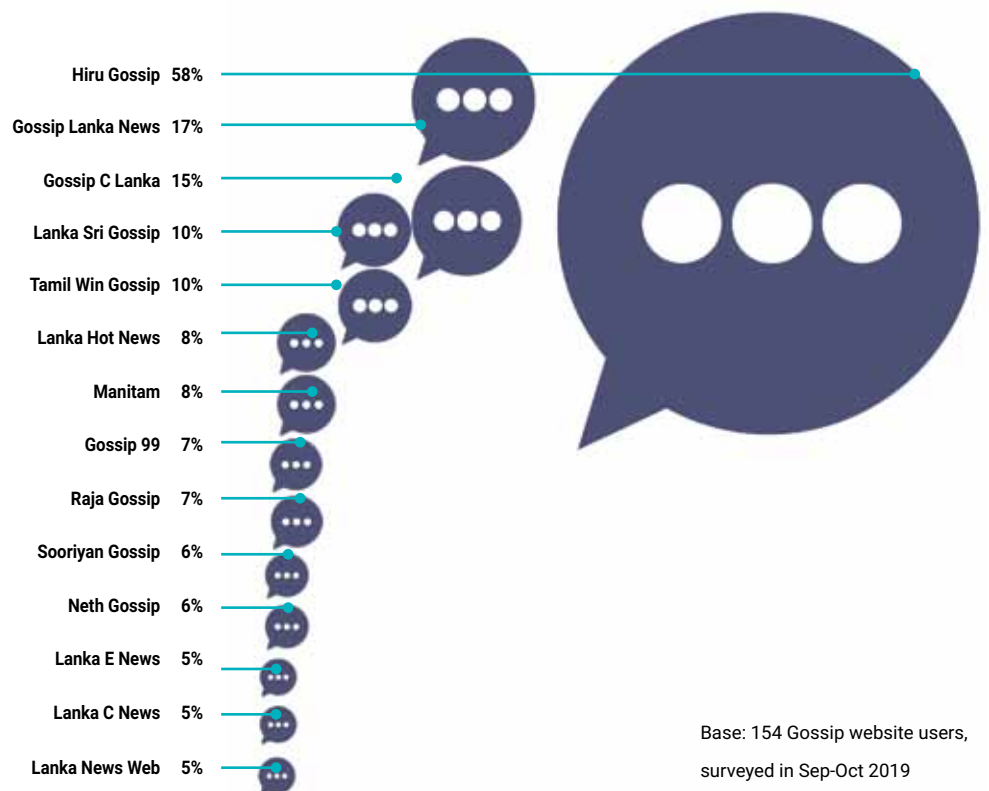


Figure 15: Gossip websites cited by survey respondents who acknowledged turning to them regularly for news

¹⁷ It is also possible that the actual user percentages are higher than admitted due to the negative social perception of gossip sites.

and entertainment updates, grotesque images of road accidents, conspiracy theories as well as political speculations.

These websites make no claims of practicing journalism, but their overall approach is similar to that of news websites. With their clickbait headlines, sensationalist content and visually appealing multi-media offerings, they are drawing an increasingly large number of users within Sri Lanka as well as from the Sinhalese and Tamil diasporas overseas.

What attracts users to gossip websites? As a working male from Kandy city area said during a focus group, the uncommon titillates. "Some gossip content is pointless, but we momentarily get excited from it: ammatasiri mehemath deyak welada (Good grief, has such a thing really happened)?"

Some leading gossip websites have built up massive user bases: the most popular ones are regularly ranked among the top 10 most visited websites in Sri Lanka (according to Alexa.com). Some legacy media companies have also joined the game, offering on their gossip sites unverified content that would not normally be published on their main websites (or in the case of broadcasters, content that is too controversial to be carried on the air).

Given that gossip websites publish on their own websites as well as on their Facebook pages with a large following, it is difficult to quantify their overall influence on public

opinion. Yet anecdotal evidence indicates it is quite significant.

Sanjana Hattotuwa, a leading researcher on digital media in Sri Lanka, wrote in October 2018 how he has been monitoring 51 leading Sinhala gossip accounts on Facebook as part of his doctoral research. He noted: "As the first and arguably enduring voice or vector that frames contemporary events, both domestic and international, nothing in Sri Lanka comes even remotely close to these gossip sites in Sinhala."¹⁸

Hattotuwa has observed that some gossip sites are clearly divided along partisan lines. A recent study by Democracy Reporting International, which analysed public discourse on Facebook before and after the Presidential Election of November 2019, noted how "gossip domains play an influential role in spreading politically manipulated narratives disregarding facts on a range of topics, including national security and religious and ethnic issues".¹⁹

A high percentage among the respondents who acknowledged visiting gossip sites regularly said they trust these sources "a lot" or "to some extent".

Such trust levels are considerably higher than those for TV, radio or newspapers (see section 3.4 below). This is one more reason why the dynamics of gossip sites need to be studied in greater depth by both media researchers and political analysts.

18 Monitoring Media Ownership, by Sanjana Hattotuwa. The Sunday Island, 27 October 2018. <https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2018/10/28/monitoring-media-ownership/>

19 Social Media Monitoring Analysis of the Discourse on Facebook before and after Sri Lanka's 2019 Presidential Election. Democracy Reporting International (DRI). June 2020. <https://bit.ly/318L7Cu>

3.4 How much do audiences trust their news sources?

Trust in a news source is built up over time and depends on cumulative user experiences. It could be based on familiarity or regularity of use – but not always so. Except for television, audience trust in news sources is revealed as very low. As many as 84% survey respondents cited television as their most trusted source of news and current affairs but trust in all other news sources lags behind by a huge margin.

That does not mean that people have no trust in these media overall, but when they are asked to select a medium they trust more than others, television triumphs.

Interestingly, when looking at the specific types of media there is a correlation between usage

of a medium and trust in a medium. If you are a frequent reader of newspapers, you generally trust newspapers more. Only when it comes to social media, there appears to be a higher degree of skepticism.

Frequent internet users tend to prefer social media (especially Facebook) as a source of news when compared to infrequent users or non-users of internet. At the same time, both categories acknowledge that they do not believe everything posted or shared in social media owing to frequent misinformation.

Of the 797 internet users in the sample, very few (6%) said they had total trust in Facebook yet 74% among them “somewhat” trusted what was being posted and shared on that platform. In contrast, 10% of internet users trust “a lot” what they see on YouTube, and another 72% trust such content “to some extent”. Interestingly, while Twitter is only



used by 7% of internet users, among them it has received the highest (20%) trust level.

During the focus group discussions, respondents gave more context to the issue of trust in the media. For instance, they gave examples of situations where they had found it difficult to trust what they were presented with.

Some news reports were considered “half-baked” as they lacked adequate details and context. Other reports were simply too incredible, such as a story about a ten-headed snake that, according to a media outlet, had emerged near a temple. The story claimed it was an auspicious sign, but in the end, it turned out that footage had appeared that way due to reflections on a glass case.

There is intense competition among broadcast and online news media to be the ‘first with the news’. This often means that unverified information is passed on, leading to audience confusion, dismay and sometimes even panic – all of which clearly erodes trust.

Sometimes trust also varies depending on the styles used for reporting news. For example, one leading channel frequently uses video animations during main news bulletins to enact major road traffic accidents or crimes. As a housewife in Colombo noted, “But we want to see the real footage so that we can know who is right or wrong.”

A woman in urban Kurunegala said she prefers live coverage of major news events as “live footage is more trustworthy when we see everything in real time”.

She seems to believe that live broadcasts may allow less opportunity for broadcast stations to select footage to reinforce their biases.

But live broadcasts come with their own issues. The breaking news style adopted by some

broadcast stations – where they intersperse scheduled programming with nuggets of new information – has irked some people. As another woman in urban Kurunegala said, “When information comes to us in bits and pieces, we just can’t trust it.”

Audience trust in the mass media is also influenced by brand reputations that have been built over the years. A man in Kurunegala who does not use the internet said: “When we

buy products, we always opt for known brands. For example, we trust Samsung and Abans more than Chinese products or other brands. Likewise, we trust some news channels more than others.”

Channel loyalty can also depend on an individual news anchor or reporter with high credibility. Such a trusted personal ‘brand’ is Azzam Ameen, an experienced journalist who worked as the BBC’s Sri Lanka correspondent for several years (and now runs his own news website).

Finally, the quantitative study also revealed some interesting findings related to specific local media outlets:

- While most (96%) said they turn to local television for news and current affairs, not all regular viewers trust the medium. When questioned about trust levels in the well-established channels, only just over a third of viewers have a high level of trust in the popular domestic channels. The two most watched channels, Hiru TV and TV Derana, were assigned the same trust levels (37% each among those aware of that channel), followed by Swarnavahini, Sirasa TV and ITN Sri Lanka.
- Trust levels in Sinhala language radio, which is a highly fragmented market due to the large number of channels, were around the same as for television. Hiru FM and FM Derana were either trusted ‘a lot’ or ‘to some extent’ by 70% and 63% respectively of those aware

“Sometimes media assumes things and adds them to the news story. When the tsunami hit in December 2004, my husband was in Kandy visiting his parents. He first heard the news that the whole of Sri Lanka’s south had been washed away and no one was alive... so they feared I was dead too - until I sent a message saying I was fine!”

Housewife in Galle

“Swarnavahini misreported that Trinity College won the big match against St. Anthony’s College but I knew that was wrong because my son is an old Antonian...I called Swarnavahini and scolded them: the boy who answered said they get berated like that all the time as they don’t verify what they report. Now I know their news can’t be trusted...”

Woman senior citizen in Kandy

of these channels. This was followed by Neth FM (54%) and Shaa FM (52%).

- Tamil language radio channels Sooriyan FM, Shakthi FM, Vasantham FM and Varnam FM all scored higher on the trust factor, with each of them winning the trust of over 75% of those who knew about the channels.

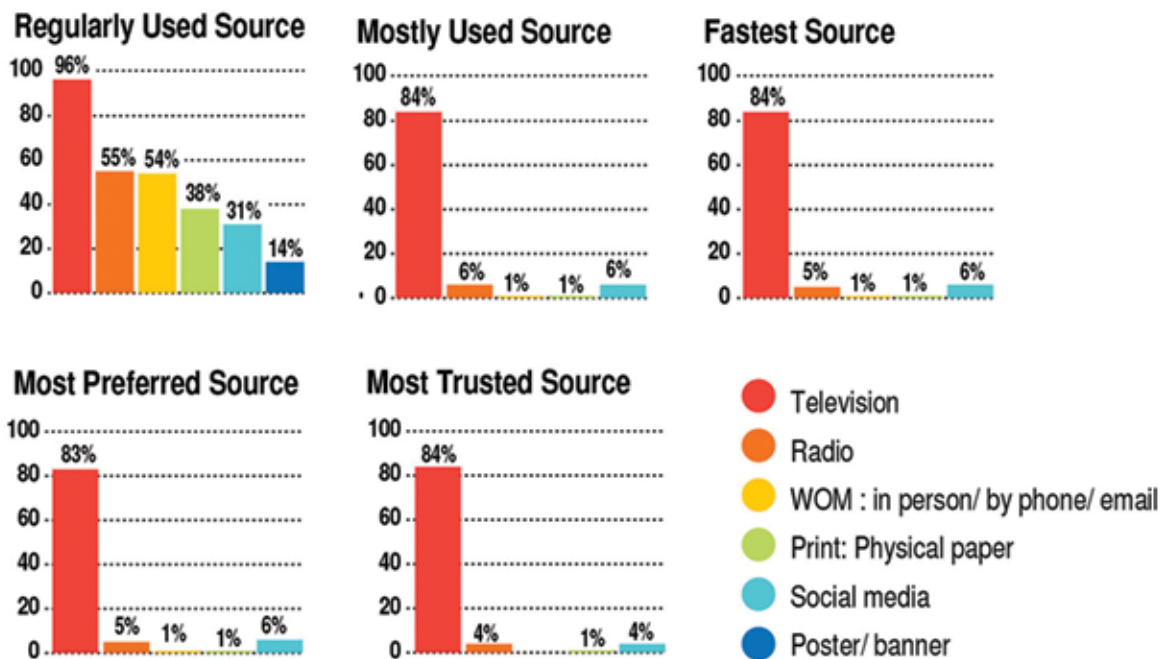
More thorough analysis of the way these media

operate and relate to their audiences could provide insights on what is working (and not working) in the Sri Lankan context.

From our study it is clear that trust is a deciding factor for audiences. The higher the trust, the higher the usage. But trust is to be gained and even small mistakes can be costly. Once trust is lost, it is not easily regained.

Level of use, preference and trust in news sources

TV is the most regularly used, first used, most preferred and most trusted source. It is followed by radio, word of mouth, printed newspapers and social media.



Questions asked:

What type of media you normally use to get NEWS or current affairs? [Multiple Answers allowed]

What is the media you mostly use to get NEWS or current affairs? [Single Answer]

What is the 1st media you get NEWS or current affairs? [Single Answer]

What is your most preferred media of NEWS or current affairs? [Single Answer]

What is your most trusted media of NEWS or current affairs? [Single Answer]

Figure 16: Level of use, preference and trust in news sources (media and non-media)



3.5 Audiences devising their own verification strategies

Living in a media environment that is increasingly filled with unverified reporting, media speculations as well as deliberate distortions or fabrications passing off as news, how can media audiences safeguard themselves from being misled by dubious content?

This challenge is not limited to Sri Lanka. The right response is strengthening media

and information literacy (MIL), which comprises a set of skills necessary for citizens to critically consume mass media and social media content. Democracy depends on the active participation of citizens in the life of their community, and MIL would provide the skills they need to make sense of the daily flow of information disseminated through new communication technologies.²⁰

There is no systematic measuring of media literacy in Sri Lanka, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the levels are low -- even among

20 Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy. Edited by Ulla Carlsson. Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG) University of Gothenburg. 2019. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/gmw2019_understanding_mil_ulla_carlsson.pdf

many with high levels of education.²¹ When many citizens do not know how to consume media and information critically, they are more likely to fall prey to half-truths, distortions or complete fabrications being peddled as news. Meanwhile, low media professionalism also makes it easier for political propagandists and various lobby groups to manipulate the media, especially at times of elections or during national emergencies.²²

Encouragingly, however, our study found that some people have come up with their own informal practices to cross-check news and current information. It appears that Sri Lankans have devised their own strategies to minimize being misled by unprofessional media content or deliberate disinformation.

“News can be trustworthy or untrustworthy... so it's up to us to identify which is which!” said a frequent internet user (female) in urban Colombo during a focus group.

Many, for instance, have a habit of cross-checking news with other sources. Interestingly, the survey showed that the most common media used to cross-check information is television – regardless of where the information was first received. Even 4 out of 10 of those who had first got a piece of information from television would use another television channel to cross-check information.

This finding further confirms Sri Lankans' high reliance on television for news and information. Word of mouth was the second-most common source to use for cross-checking information with people reaching out to friends, relatives or colleagues for confirmation on stories.

Rarely did people list newspapers and social media as sources for cross-checking information. For instance, only 1 out of 10 people who had first got a piece of information from television would cross-check with newspapers and social media. And less than 1 out of 20 people who had first read something on social media would cross-check with newspapers and social media.

In addition to people's habit of cross-checking information, other media literacy abilities were revealed during focus group discussions:

- Some have developed an innate sense of what trustworthy news should look like. For example, a senior citizen (female) in urban Kandy said: “It is difficult to believe news just from a single source. So what I usually do is talk to my family after I hear a news story to decide if it's true or not. A good piece of news has to quote at least two credible sources.”
- Some participants questioned why television news reporting appears superficial and lacking proper context. As a woman in urban Kandy said, “Every time we see university students picketing

21 However, the government's Department of Census and Statistics annually measures digital literacy. In the definition they use, a person (aged 5 to 69) is considered digitally literate if he/she can use a computer, lap top, tablet or smartphone on his/her own. The latest survey in 2019 measured digital literacy at 46% of the population (men 49.7% and women 42.6%). Digital literacy is higher than computer literacy for all demographic groups, showing the shift from computers to smartphones and tablets.

<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/ComputerLiteracy/StaticInformation/Bulletins/2019-Annual>

22 Concerns over fake news, disinformation ahead of Sri Lanka polls. The Hindu. 13 November 2019.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/concerns-over-fake-news-disinformation-ahead-of-sri-lanka-polls/article29965462.ece>

on the road, the news is about tear gas or property damage. No one talks about why these students are protesting. News projects students simply as disruptors.”

- Audiences are learning to be wary of what is shared on social media, especially at times when community tensions are running high. As a man in urban Kandy recalled, “During the Digana violence (March 2018) someone posted a video on YouTube of a crowd gathered in [nearby] Thannekumbura on YouTube and said they were about to attack. But later that night when we called our friends, they said nothing of that sort had happened!”
- Not every audience member might fully understand how the mass media works, but at least some realise when they are being poorly served. A Colombo housewife who does not use the internet noted, “Some media rush the news just because they want to be the first one to show it...they do so without verifying facts. Then we get only half the story!”

- There is rising awareness among media users about disinformation (which many of them label as “fake news”). As a Jaffna man said, “If a news story changes every time it is reported, it just shows that it was originally based on rumors and fake news.”

- Not only mass media and social media but individuals can also spread falsehoods knowingly or unknowingly. A senior citizen man in rural Kandy who is an infrequent user of the internet noted: “During the Digana incidents, the government blocked social media, so we got all the news through other people -- and half of them turned out to be wrong!”

All in all, these findings paint an image of a Sri Lankan population that is increasingly aware of the pitfalls in uncritical news and information consumption. There also appears to be a demand for the media to be more transparent about their methods as well as them becoming better in fact-checking information and professionalizing their practices.



3.6 Geography shapes news media use and audience perceptions

As noted elsewhere in this report, the study found a few differences in how urban residents and rural residents perceive, consume and react to news and current information. However, there were many more similarities than differences.

What is more notable and interesting is how news consumption shows some regional differences irrespective of the urban-rural divide.²³

In particular, it appears that residents in the Northern and Eastern provinces -- where the Tamil language is dominant -- consume news in ways different to the rest of the country where the Sinhala language is more widely spoken.²⁴

Sri Lanka has only two hubs where mass media content is produced for the whole island: around 80% of all content is generated in the greater Colombo area in the Western Province, and the balance comes from Jaffna in the Northern Province (digital media content production appears more geographically distributed, but there is no reliable data to determine its extent.) Colombo's media content comes out in all three languages, but Jaffna content is mostly in Tamil (and the rest in English).

This study found how Sinhala/English language radio and TV channels that are popular elsewhere in the country do not command significant audiences in the Northern or Eastern provinces. Some Tamil channels originating from Colombo do have some following in those two provinces -- but they have to compete with local content originating in Jaffna, and even more so with broadcasts coming over from southern India (home to over 60 million Tamil speakers).

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the highest percentage of respondents citing the use of subscription/pay TV (coming via satellite or cable) is found in the Northern Province: it reported 48% of pay TV use compared to less than 5% in all other provinces. This may be due to the popularity of Tamil language TV channels originating from southern India.²⁵

Whatever sources they use to access the news, residents in the North and East assign a high value to it. While a national average of 77% said news is "very important" for their daily lives, this figure was 93% in the Northern Province, the highest in the island, followed by 80% in the Eastern Province.

However, responses to another question shows that their interest in national news and current affairs is very low. Overall, four out of 10 Sri Lankans thought national news was very

23 According to the last Census of 2012, urban residents made up 18.2% of the population while rural residents were 77.4% and the rest 4.4% lived in the plantation estate sector. However, Sri Lanka uses a narrow administrative definition of 'urban' that ignores many areas that have been urbanised in recent decades. UN-HABITAT's State of Sri Lankan Cities 2018 report has called for a redefinition of 'urban' in terms of spatial characteristics, and a revision of municipal boundaries to incorporate fringe urban areas. <https://unhabitat.org/the-state-of-sri-lankan-cities-2018-report>

24 Sri Lanka's population was projected as 21.8 million in 2019. The ethnic composition found by the last census in 2012 was: 74.9% Sinhalese, 11.2% Sri Lanka Tamils, 9.3% Sri Lanka Moors (Muslims), 4.1% Indian Tamils and 0.5% others. Since many Muslims also speak the Tamil language, the total number of Tamil speakers could be estimated to be around 5 million.

25 Overall, around 30% of Sri Lanka's 5.4 million households now have a pay TV arrangement. Local TV channels are distributed terrestrially, using free-to-air signals that households capture using a roof-top antenna.

important, but in the Northern Province only 14% said they followed any national news.

Does this mean Sri Lankan society's polarization along ethnic and linguistic lines is also mirrored in how people consume news

in the media? Do Northern audiences turn to Indian broadcasts because news media originating from greater Colombo do not adequately cover the North and East? These questions are worth investigating by other media researchers.



3.7 Perceived biases in the news

Do audiences think their news media is biased? The survey briefly probed audience perceptions of biases in news.

In discussing media bias, a distinction was drawn between news and current affairs coverage in the state-owned media and the privately-owned media.

This is because the state remains a major content publisher in Sri Lanka's media

industry. It owns one of the largest newspaper publishers (Lake House), national TV (Rupavahini), national radio (SLBC, with over a dozen channels), as well as a commercial broadcast station (ITN Sri Lanka). As former monopolies, the state broadcasters have some historical advantages in infrastructure and audience bases developed over time.

The study findings indicate that audiences do differentiate between private media and state media (or 'government media' as they are popularly known, since they have historically engaged in promoting the views of the government in office rather than act as public

"If a media house doesn't like an issue or person, they keep criticizing it all the time. Sirasa TV kept reporting the PM change all day but Rupavahini did not report much on it. One channel says Ranil Wickremesinghe is the rightful Prime Minister and another says Mahinda Rajapaksa is the rightful Prime Minister based on their political biases..."

Housewife in urban Galle (referring to 51-day Constitutional crisis of late 2018)

Audience Perceptions of Bias in News Coverage

Question:

What is your opinion on news published on government media and private media?

1 among 4 options to be chosen

Base: All 2,014 Respondents

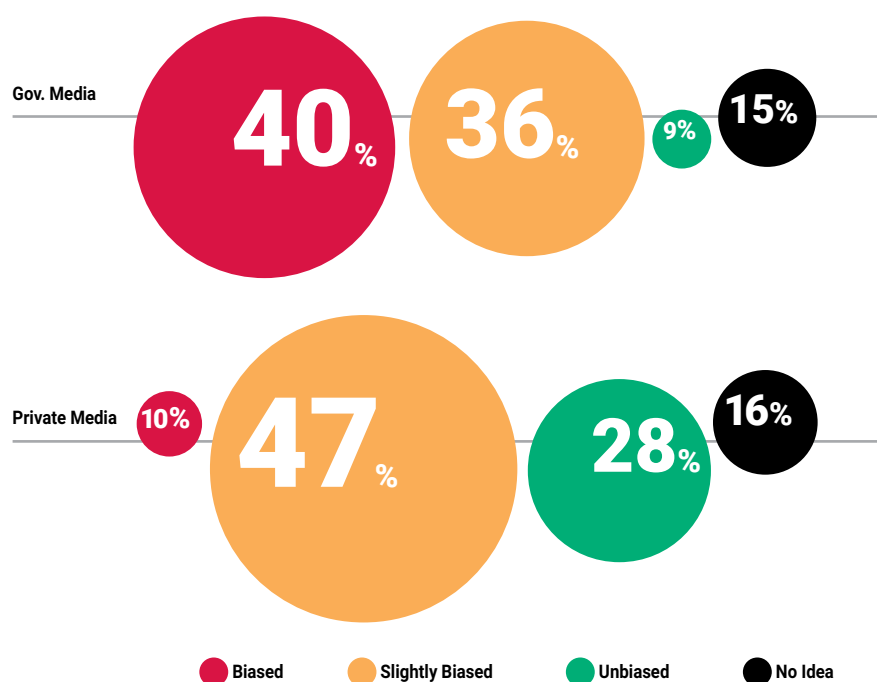
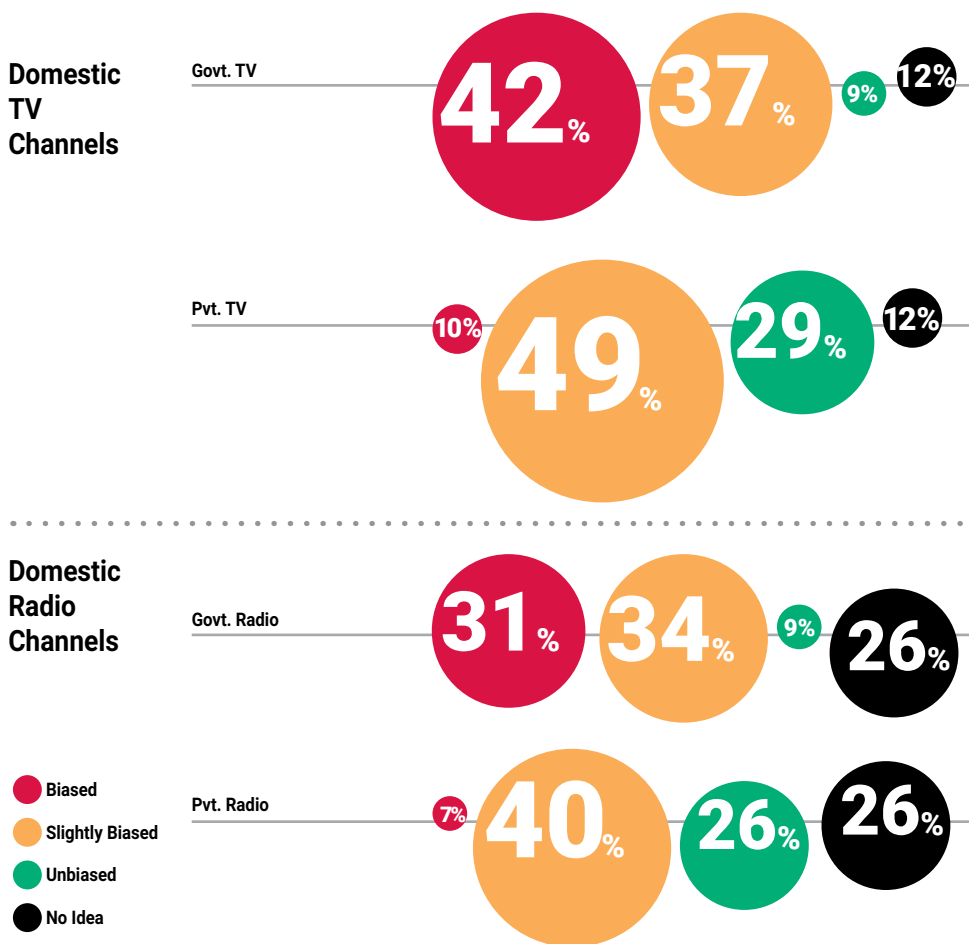


Figure 17: How audiences perceive bias in media-based news sources

State owned broadcasters seen as more biased than private ones



Base: All 2,014 Respondents during Sep – Oct 2019

Figure 18: State owned broadcasters are seen as more biased than privately owned ones

“Government channels try to change [distract] the minds of people, e.g. when petrol prices went up, they focus more on cricket!”

Male senior citizen, urban Kurunegala

service media).

The perceived credibility of state media is lower than that of private media. Only 9% of the full sample said state media is unbiased compared, to 28% who felt private media is unbiased.

Answering the same question, 40% of respondents felt state media is biased, and

another 36% saw state media being ‘slightly biased’. In comparison, only 10% of private media was considered biased, and another 47% felt they are slightly biased.

When it came to the two most widely used news sources – television and radio – the perception of bias was significantly higher for state media: 42% felt state television was biased,

while only 10% considered private television as biased. There was similar disparity in the audience perceptions of bias in state radio and private radio. Interestingly, over a quarter of respondents had no opinion on biases in the radio news.

It was not possible to further explore the reasons for these perceptions within the limits of this survey. Views expressed during focus group discussions indicate that some audience members are weary of frequent and sometimes sustained biases in news coverage.

There are structural reasons for state broadcasting's news coverage being in favour of the government in office. All members of SLBC's and Rupavahini's governing boards are appointed by the Minister in charge of media, who may dismiss

them at any time. Staff members are deemed to be employees of a state corporation (i.e. semi-governmental). Misuse of these entities for political propaganda goes back to at least half a century.

Bias can exist in many forms. Political bias is probably the best known and the most visible kind, but other kinds of biases too can be found in Sri Lanka's media -- for example, deep-rooted biases against women and sexual minorities.

Content analyses done by other media researchers show how the privately-owned media have their own biases, often serving political or commercial interests rather than the public interest. Notwithstanding that complex reality, audience members seem to consider state media as considerably more biased than private media.

Bias can exist in many forms. Political bias is probably the best known and the most visible kind, but other kinds of biases too can be found in Sri Lanka's media -- for example, deep-rooted biases against women and sexual minorities.

3.8 News consumption in times of crisis: Easter Sunday terror attacks of April 2019

Having had a decade of peace following the civil war's end in May 2009, Sri Lankans woke up to a horrendous Easter Sunday in 2019.

On the morning of 21 April 2019, suicide bombers detonated heavy explosives inside three crowded churches (in Negombo, Batticaloa and Colombo) and three luxury hotels in Colombo. The coordinated attacks killed over 260 (all civilians) and injured more than 500. Among those killed were at least 45 children, most of them attending church services, and over three dozen foreign tourists staying at the hotels.

Criminal investigators soon determined that all eight suicide bombers were Sri Lankan citizens linked to National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), a militant Islamist group with suspected foreign ties. Within hours of the attack, the government temporarily blocked major social media and messaging services claiming that "false news reports were spreading through social media."²⁶ A countrywide state of emergency was declared the following day.

Naturally, the attacks, and the aftermath, were major news events in Sri Lanka and they also dominated international news for several days. Within minutes of the attacks that started happening from 8.45 am that morning, almost all Sri Lankan television and radio stations interrupted their regular programming and went into breaking news mode.²⁷ Meanwhile mobile phone networks were overwhelmed with thousands frantically calling their

contacts seeking or sharing news. Internet users were glued to their devices, browsing anxiously to get updates from social media, instant messaging services or news websites.

In the hours and days following the attacks, newsrooms faced many challenges in covering this story. Many journalists who had reported on the civil war (and had also covered the tsunami of December 2004) have moved on, so newsrooms struggled to gather, verify and process field reportage and images drawn from multiple locations impacted by Easter Sunday attacks.

Unlike when the civil war was reported, so many digital outlets are now competing with legacy media to be the 'first with the news'. This scramble led to some carrying unverified information or wild speculations. An initial agreement among television broadcasters not to show gory visuals did not last too long as some news websites and gossip websites breached all media ethics in publishing disturbing images – some of it captured by eyewitnesses on their smartphones.

As it happens, the attacks took place just days after the qualitative phase for the audience study had been finalised. While such a big news event could potentially distort the data with discrepancies between the qualitative and the quantitative phase, we instead decided to address the situation directly and include questions in the survey on people's news consumption behaviour following the attack. We were keen to understand where Sri Lankans go for news and reliable information in times of crisis.

Contrary to what might be expected, most Sri Lankans did not flock to social media or online outlets following the attacks. Instead, television continued to be the most preferred media for news consumption – that was also where a

26 Sri Lankan government blocks social media and imposes curfew following deadly blasts. The Washington Post, 22 April 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/04/21/sri-lankan-government-blocks-social-media-imposes-curfew-following-deadly-blasts/>

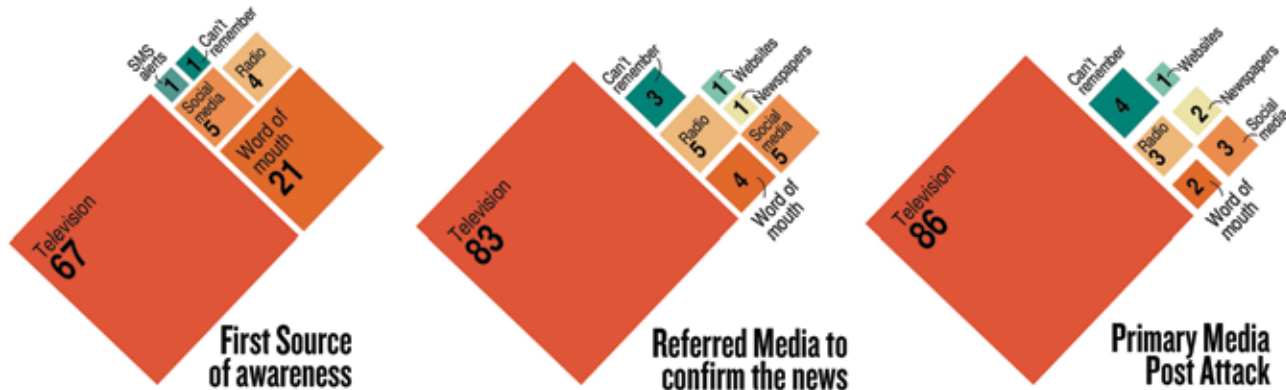
27 For a journalistically compiled timeline of that day's incidents, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts/picture-emerges-of-well-to-do-young-bombers-behind-sri-lanka-carnage-idUSKCN1S00G2>



Front pages of Sri Lankan newspapers on 22 April 2019, the day after Easter Sunday attacks.
Montage courtesy Verité Research

Easter Sunday 2019 Terror Attacks: Sources of News

For most, television was the first source of breaking news, first choice for verification and primary media to keep up with news. Next came word of mouth and social media



Questions asked (10 answer options prompted including 'other' and 'can't remember'):

From where did you first hear about the April 21st Easter Sunday Attacks? [Single Answer]

What was your first choice of information source when you heard about the attacks? [Single Answer]

What became your primary choice of information source in the days following the attacks? [Single Answer]

Figure 19: Where survey respondents first heard the news, cross-checked and then mostly used as a source in the aftermath of Easter Sunday terror attacks on 21 April 2019

majority (67%) first heard about the attacks. A little more than one out of five first heard about the attacks from others (word of mouth) while only one out of 20 said they learnt about the attacks on social media. However, younger citizens stood out significantly, with 15% among those aged 15 to 24 finding out about the attacks on social media.

Interestingly, most people (83%), including the younger ones, chose to turn on the television to get confirmation of the attacks. The second-most preferred sources for getting confirmation were radio and social media -- but only 1 out of 20 people relied on either. Again, the younger media users differed slightly, with 12% among those aged 15 to 24 going to social media to confirm what they had heard.

Television remained the medium of choice for most people (86%) following the attacks.

Very few preferred other sources such as social media (3%), radio (3%), word of mouth (2%) and newspapers (2%). Even among the younger ones, only 8 % among those aged 15 to 25 preferred to get their news updates from social media during this time.

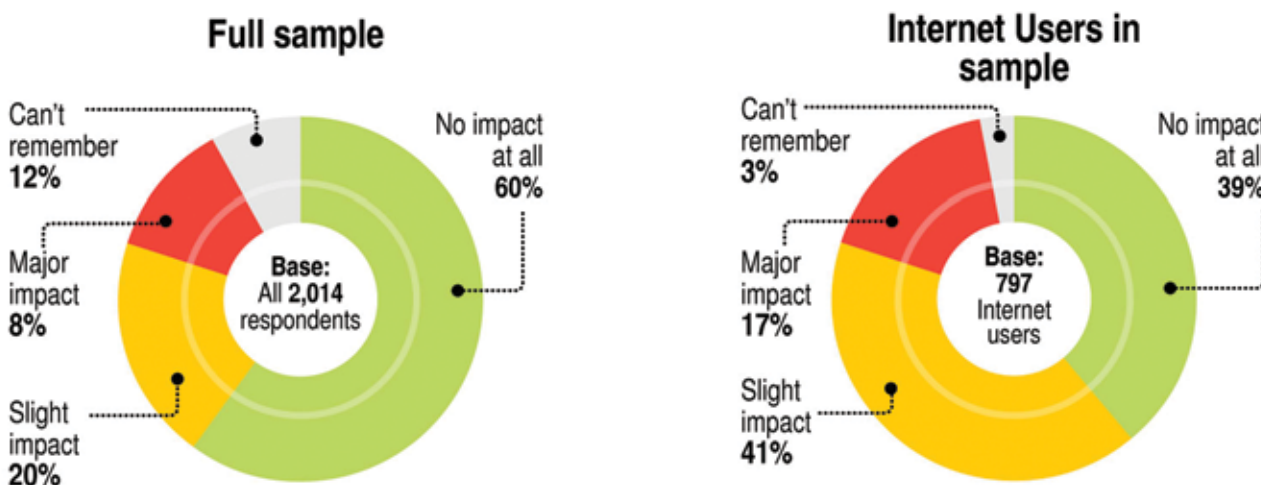
Predictably, people's news consumption seemed to grow on an overall level in the days and weeks following the attacks. Four out of five people agreed that they watched more television after the attacks as compared to 6 months earlier. A little more than four out of 10 people agreed that they listened more to radio; three out of 10 said they read more newspapers; and two out of 10 people had interacted more with social media.

These findings correspond with other similar studies on how people seek and access more news and information in times of crisis.

Impact of social media blocking in April – May 2019

Majority said they were 'not impacted at all'
8% saying major impact were mainly in 25 – 44 age group

17% of internet users: major impact



Question asked (4 options given, single answer allowed)

To what extent the blocking/shutting down of social media impacted on your day to day life?

Figure 20: Impact of temporary social media blocking in Sri Lanka in April and May 2019

3.9 Social Media blocking in times of crisis

How were people impacted by the temporary blockings of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Viber, Snapchat and Facebook Messenger imposed by the government from April 21 to 30 and re-imposed twice during May 2019 when anti-Muslim violence erupted in some parts of the country?²⁸

Probably due to the limited reliance on social media platforms for information following

the terror attacks, a majority of participants in the study (60%) did not recall being impacted significantly by the blocking. One out of five stated that they were slightly impacted, and less than one out of 10 recalled a major impact – the latter mainly consisting of people in the age group of 25 to 44.

However, when looking only at the regular internet users, 17% saw the blockings as having had a major impact on themselves. This percentage could have been higher if not for the fact that those with necessary technological skills used virtual proxy servers (VPNs) to get around the blocking.²⁹

²⁸ <https://netblocks.org/reports/sri-lanka-blocks-social-media-for-third-time-in-one-month-M8JRjg80>

²⁹ There was no full-scale shutting down of internet access, and only designated social media and messaging services were blocked. Among participants in the study, 12% agreed with the statement "I managed to access the social media using VPN" (another 3% slightly agreed). There are no reliable estimates of the actual use of VPNs within Sri Lanka, where the practice remains legal at the time of writing.

Does this mean there is public approval for social media blocking? Not necessarily. These findings only indicate that most respondents in our survey were not personally inconvenienced. But the bigger debate around this is more complex.

So far, Sri Lanka has temporarily blocked social media and messaging services on four occasions (the first occasion was during anti-Muslim violence in March 2018). Such blockings were ordered by the telecom regulator under the telecommunications law without having any specific regulatory guidelines. The arbitrary nature of such blockings and the lack of transparency in decision making have been widely criticised.

Social media's value as mass communications platforms for sharing vital information in a time of crisis is well established. In Sri Lanka, where legacy media outlets regularly come under pressure from governments to self-censor their news coverage, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are where critical voices and counter narratives can find free expression.

This was highlighted by the Washington Post's editorial board that noted in an editorial: "...a

moratorium on Facebook and other essential services in Sri Lanka is also a moratorium on easy communication. Friends and families cannot tell each other whether they are safe. Anyone seeking accurate information about the attacks may find themselves similarly stymied; because controls on traditional media in Sri Lanka are tight, Facebook and sites like it play a valuable role. Meanwhile, technologically sophisticated users, including many bad actors, will find workarounds to reach blacked-out websites anyway."³⁰

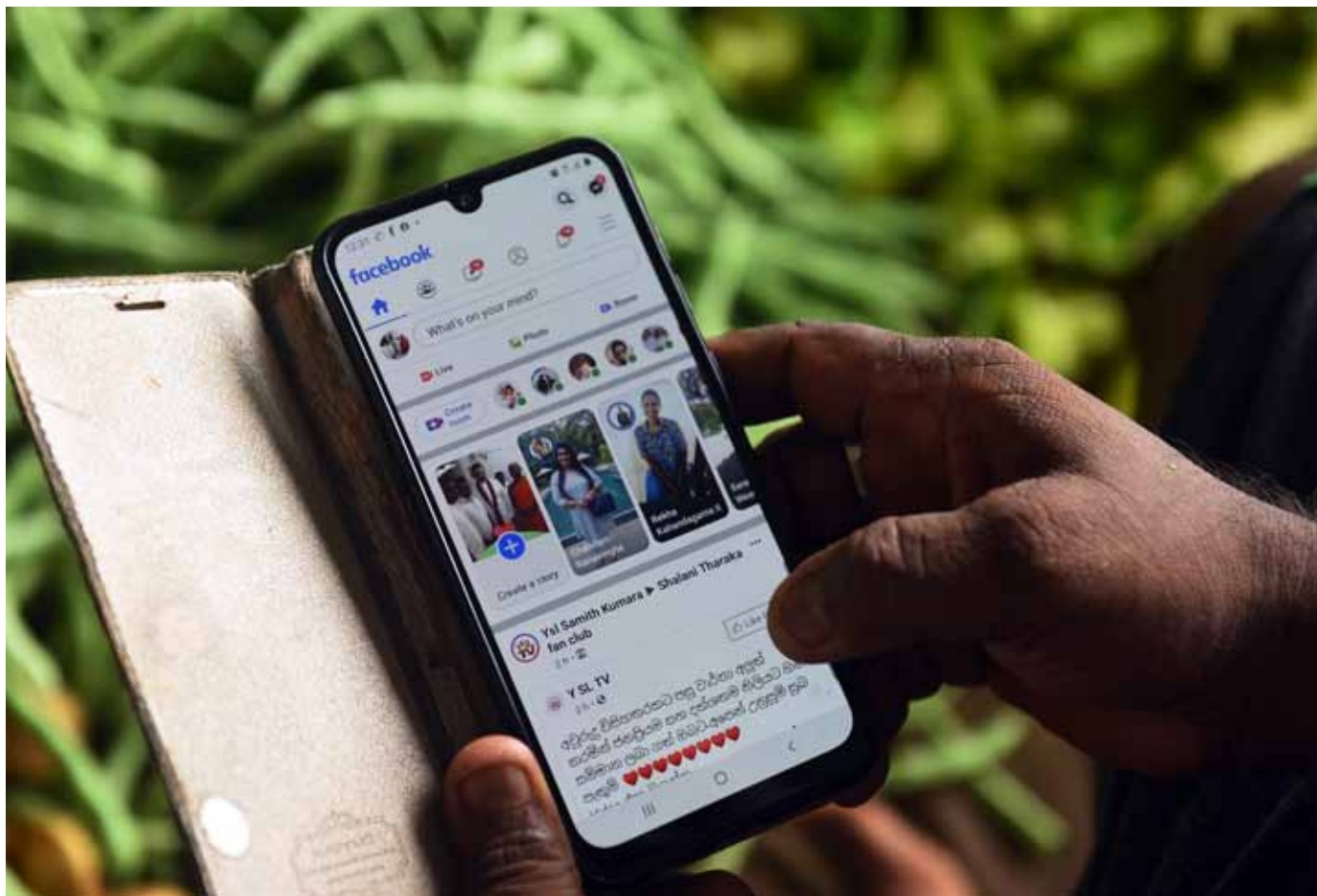
In Sri Lanka, where legacy media outlets regularly come under pressure from governments to self-censor their news coverage, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are where critical voices and counter narratives can find free expression.

Indeed, knee-jerk regulatory reactions like completely blocking social media for many days do not solve the problem – such actions can often make matters worse. In a study on the 7-day social media blocking imposed by the Sri Lanka government in March 2018, data scientist Yudhanjaya Wijeratne concluded that "not only did people circumvent it [by using VPNs], anecdotal evidence suggests it did significant damage to tourism and e-commerce, both of which rely on Facebook ads".³¹

When looking into the role of social media following the Easter Sunday attacks, Wijeratne concluded that Facebook's Safety Check feature helped many users to

30 Sri Lanka's decision to block social media after the bombings sets an alarming precedent. The Washington Post, 23 April 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/sri-lankas-decision-to-block-social-media-after-the-bombings-sets-an-alarming-precedent/2019/04/22/d04d449e-652c-11e9-a1b6-b29b90efa879_story.html

31 Blocking social networks after terrorist attacks can do more harm than good. The Verge, 23 April 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/interface/2019/4/23/18511812/sri-lanka-facebook-ban-easter-bombings-social-networks>



quickly find out whether their friends and family were safe after the Easter bombings. Although social media disinformation was also spread on the platform, it was not solely due to Facebook's shortcomings. Official information disseminated by the government was haphazard, the researcher said, and traditional media outlets in Sri Lanka, like newspapers, were not always accurate.³²

The 'weaponisation' of social media to spread disinformation and hate speech that escalate tensions or unfolding crises requires carefully calibrated regulatory responses

The 'weaponisation' of social media to spread disinformation and hate speech that escalate tensions or unfolding crises requires carefully calibrated regulatory responses. Sri Lanka needs to evolve legally-mandated procedures for 'digital curfews' for threat assessment, decision making and implementing very limited scope internet restrictions.³³

32 Don't Praise the Sri Lankan Government for Blocking Facebook. Wired, 23 April 2019. <https://www.wired.com/story/sri-lanka-bombings-social-media-shutdown/>

33 Say no to cyber-nanny state in Sri Lanka, by Nalaka Gunawardene. Daily FT, 9 May 2019. <http://www.ft.lk/columns/Say-no-to-cyber-nanny-state-in-Sri-Lanka/4-677845>

What Do Audiences Think of Media Freedom?

Almost 7 out of 10 consider media freedom as 'very important'

A third thinks there already is complete media freedom in Sri Lanka.

Base: 2,014 Respondents from all districts of Sri Lanka, surveyed in Sept-Oct 2019

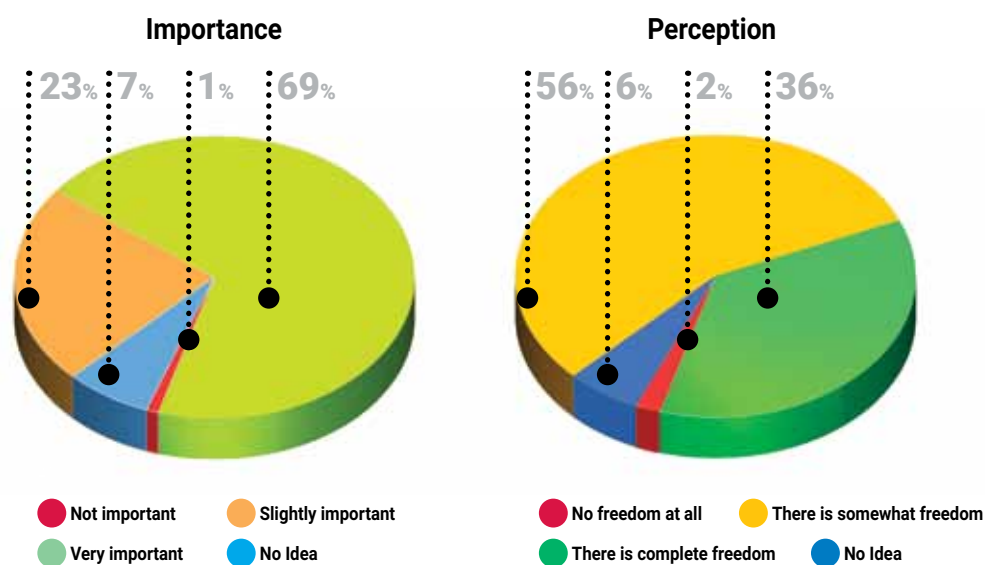


Figure 21: Audience views on the importance of media freedom and its prevalence

3.10 What do audiences think of media freedom and access to information?

The survey included two questions that sought respondents' understanding and perceptions on two larger considerations: media freedom and access to information.

First, the full sample was asked to indicate the level of importance by choosing one of four responses (very important; slightly important; not important; no idea). More than two thirds of respondents ranked both media freedom and access to information as very important; most of the others acknowledged these factors as slightly important.

In actual numbers:

- Almost 7 out of 10 respondents considered media freedom as very important, while 23% found it slightly important.
- Some 68% of respondents considered access to information as very important. For another 24% it was slightly important.

There were no significant differences in these views across genders or age groups, but residents in some provinces felt a bit more strongly about these concerns. For example, the highest percentage (87%) of respondents ranking media freedom as very important was in the Northern Province, followed by Southern (84%) and Sabaragamuwa (83%) provinces. On access to information, 85%

Views on Access to Information

Access to information is considered as very important by most people.

A majority thinks that information is already accessible or somewhat accessible.

Base: 2,014 Respondents from all districts of Sri Lanka, surveyed in Sept-Oct 2019

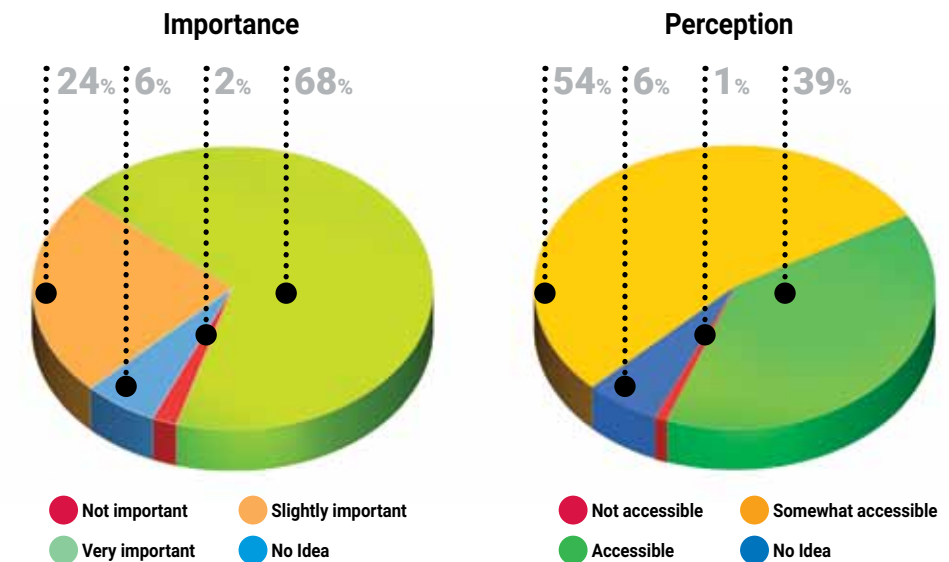


Figure 22: Audience views on the importance of access to information and its prevalence

and 84% of residents respectively in the Southern and Northern Provinces ranked it as most important. Evidently these concerns are highly valued by more people living away from the more affluent Western Province.

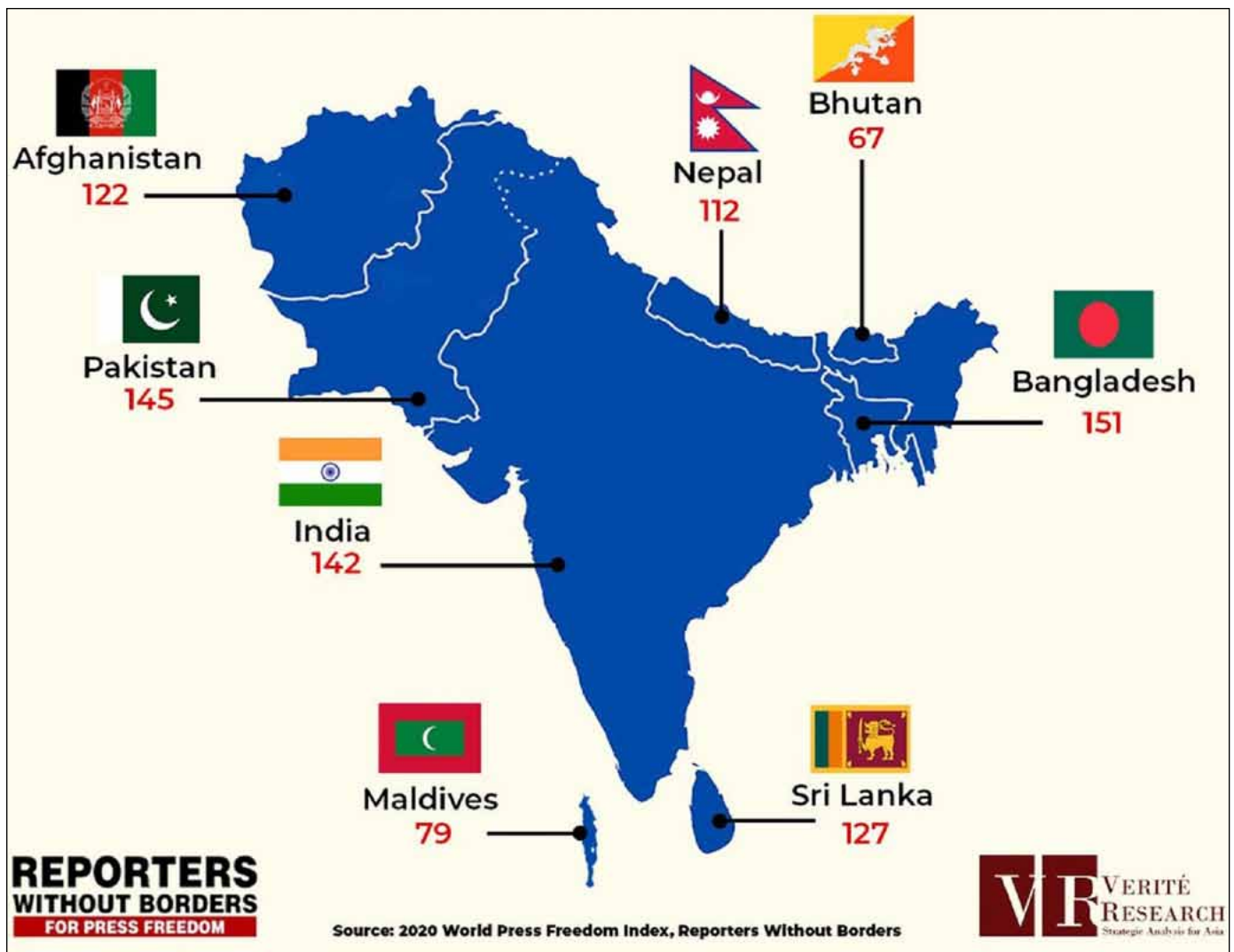
Next, respondents were asked about their perception of the prevailing levels of media freedom and access to information. The cumulative answers were as follows:

- More than half (56%) felt that there is some level of media freedom, while 36% felt there is complete media freedom. Only 2% thought there was no media freedom at all.
- While 39% believed information was accessible, another 54% said information was somewhat accessible.

There was no significant difference in perceptions of men and women. However, those aged between 15 and 34 had a slightly higher level of perception that information was accessible.

How do these perceptions compare with ground realities for media freedom and access to information in Sri Lanka?

From 2015 to 2019, there has been some progress in ensuring freedom of expression including media freedom. This is evidenced by Sri Lanka's gradual rise in rankings in the World Press Freedom Index compiled by the advocacy group Reporters without Borders (RSF). In 2014 and 2015, Sri Lanka was ranked 165 out of 180 countries in the world, and this ranking slowly improved to reach 126 out of



World Press Freedom Index 2020 South Asia rankings, image courtesy Verité Research

180 countries by 2019.³⁴ However, various legal, market and media industry factors continue to affect and limit media freedom.

The South Asia Press Freedom Report for 2018-19, compiled by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and released in May 2019, noted: "In the period under review, democratic space for freedom of expression and dissent remained resilient amidst political turmoil. A majority of the private media institutions demonstrated poor ethics in reporting the constitutional coup and later became hostile towards civil society groups and activists that protested the coup. Some of the media institutions went to the extent of directing personalized attacks against activists. In the meanwhile, state-owned media is plagued with biased reporting, leading to renewed calls for the transformation of state-owned media into public service media."³⁵

Where access to information is concerned, Sri Lanka has taken some forward steps, the most important of which was the passing of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in June 2016. Citizens have been able to submit RTI applications since February 2017 when the Act became fully operational. According to data collated by the Ministry of Mass Media, over 33,000 RTI applications had been submitted to hundreds of public authorities up to July 2019.

A countrywide survey done for the Ministry of Mass Media in mid 2019 revealed that 73% of Sri Lankans recognised RTI as a key right of citizens, which compares well with long-established rights like the right to vote, right to freedom of expression, and freedom of religion. Four out of 10 citizens were also aware of the existence of the RTI Act as a law that gives effect to the right.³⁶

34 Sri Lanka's ranking in 2020 was 127 out of 180 countries assessed.
<https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka>

35 South Asia Press Freedom Report 2018-19. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). May 2019. https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Truth_Vs_Misinformation_-_South_Asia_Press_Freedom_Report_2018-19.pdf

36 Citizens warming up to RTI, new survey finds. The Sunday Morning, 20 October 2019. <http://www.themorning.lk/citizens-warming-up-to-rti-new-survey-finds/>

4. Conclusion

Large sample studies of this nature are very helpful to discern how audiences relate to legacy media and engage with social media.

At a time of rapid transformation in the media sector, it is crucial for media policy makers, media owners, media professionals and media activists to better understand how audiences perceive news and current information, in what different ways content is consumed, and how much – or how little – audiences trust their sources of news.

Where legacy media is concerned, the audience is the least involved stakeholder -- coming well behind proprietors, managers, journalists and advertisers -- and in Sri Lanka they are often taken for granted by media outlets. Yet, as our findings illustrate, the audience is a heterogeneous group with their own strong opinions and preferences.

Audience studies can also help shed some light on how to devise strategies to cope with disinformation that is increasingly flowing through both legacy and digital media. While

some audience members struggle to separate facts from fabrications parading as news, there are others who have improvised their own ways of cross-checking.

While offering a detailed picture on how audiences in Sri Lanka consume news and current information, this survey also has provided some indicators on challenges and issues in both legacy media and social media.

While some audience members struggle to separate facts from fabrications parading as news, others have improvised their own ways of cross-checking information.

Having collated and analysed how 2,014 respondents from across the country and from all walks of life responded, we can now test our four hypotheses.

• ***Hypothesis 1: Media consumers in Sri Lanka have low levels of trust in the legacy media, and typically refer to multiple sources to verify news and current information.***

This is partly supported by the study. The gradual shifting from legacy media to digital or web-based media is taking place in Sri Lanka too, yet legacy media – especially TV and radio – remain the most widely used. Higher trust levels are still seen for some





legacy media (private TV news being the more trusted). However, more than three quarters of the total sample was aware of state media biases, while more than half agreed about private media biases. Some respondents may have conflated trust with brand loyalty (which is high in the broadcast sector). Despite trust/loyalty to a given media outlet, many audience members say they refer to multiple sources for verifying news.

- ***Hypothesis 2: Media consumers in Sri Lanka increasingly prefer social media (and Facebook in particular) as a source of news and current information.***

A majority in this sample debunk the assumption that people in Sri Lanka increasingly prefer social media, Facebook in particular, for their news. Domestic television channels came first while social media was only fourth in terms of news source preference, with less than one third trusting Facebook or other online platforms. The slow transition from legacy media sources to online sources can be seen among younger people but even among them, most say they turn to legacy media in times of national crisis.

- ***Hypothesis 3: Media consumers in Sri Lanka find it difficult to critically reflect on social media content, leaving room for disinformation and misinformation to spread rapidly.***

This is somewhat proven by the study findings. Sections of legacy media (especially the more popular television and radio channels, all privately owned) are trusted by more than half their audience.

Popular newspapers are also trusted by a significant number of their readers, though to a lesser degree than broadcast channels. More than 70% of Facebook users and YouTube users say they trust what they find on these platforms. All this indicates a widespread inability to discern reliable information from the rest, a weakness being exploited by originators and peddlers of disinformation. Many audience members look up multiple sources as a safeguard against being misled or manipulated, but it is not a fail-safe strategy.

- ***Hypothesis 4: There are age, gender and geographic variables in how people in Sri Lanka consume legacy media and social media content (in terms of news).***

Age appears to be the biggest differentiator in media consumption in Sri Lanka. Sixty per cent of Sri Lankans in the 15 to 24 age group get their news from social media, and nearly half of 25-to-34-year-olds also cited the same source. Among those older than 35 years, fewer people access news through social media (it drops to just 3% for those older than 55). Both men and women consume news in legacy media in similar ways, but social media use patterns show a gender-based difference. While only a quarter of women said they get their news from social media, 41% men admitted to doing so.

To sum up, our initial presumptions about media consumption patterns have been reality-checked by the study outcome. The findings are revealing and highlight the value of actually asking audiences in a structured manner how they seek, find and engage with news and current information.

5. Recommendations

The purpose of this study went beyond merely uncovering the news consumption habits of Sri Lankans. We hope that this study would help improve news content production and dissemination, and also inform future media development efforts in the country.

The following recommendations are offered for consideration (as applicable) by the government, media industry, media professionals, media regulators and media educators. These are made with the hope of evolving an enabling regulatory environment; nurturing a media industry that is more responsive to audiences; and enhancing media and information literacy among media users.

For journalists, editors and media managers in the news media industry:

- **Don't underestimate your audience:** Media audiences are becoming more discerning, and they are using their own strategies for evaluating news items and sources. If they feel under-served or mistreated by a particular source, they will move away – and might influence peers to do the same.
- **Audience trust matters more than ever:** Gone are the days when audiences could be taken for granted. In today's multi source media and information landscape, audiences have an enhanced choice. The best way to retain current audiences and grow new ones is to earn their trust through more professional news content and audience engagement.
- **Embrace digital, purposefully:** Going digital is a trend, but that by itself cannot increase a media outlet's authenticity or business viability. Adopting or increasing the use of digital technologies should be pursued while ensuring the core values of news and current affairs journalism.
- **Innovate new ways of producing and delivering content:** Legacy media is still a major source of news and current information even as digital-only media are increasing their audience shares. To remain relevant and viable, both kinds of media should innovate in how they produce and deliver good journalistic content.
- **Monitor demographics and technology:** Media consumption is influenced by changing demographics as well as by technological advances. The changes they produce are incremental and complex. Journalists and media managers should carefully monitor how these key factors shape their industry globally, nationally and locally.
- **Study audience behaviours and preferences:** All media companies should conduct regular audience research. Smaller media companies may pool resources for audience studies or collaborate with academic institutions. Content and marketing strategies need to be informed by such research findings.
- **Go more local:** Given the fragmented (and further fragmenting) media audience, Sri Lanka's media should consider evolving in the direction of more local and hyperlocal content creation. They should also look at novel ways of audience engagement both online and offline.
- **More media startups wanted:** The changing media and information landscape opens up opportunities for more digital media startups. Such enterprises should be given easier access to credit, investments as well as strategic inputs for business strategy and tech innovation.

For media educators, trainers and researchers

- **Pay more attention to the audience dimension:** Media education and training curricular in Sri Lanka are mostly or entirely about producing and distributing journalism and other media content. More attention should be paid in the education and training of media professionals on understanding and engaging media audiences.
- **Broaden the scope of media research:** While analyzing and critiquing media content and media coverage gaps, media researchers should also investigate the 'demand side' of media, e.g. factors that engender or inhibit audience trust in news; dynamics of peer recommendations and sharing of news or other information through social media; and how audiences behave in times of emergencies or disasters.
- **Understand how old and new communication methods co-exist:** As this study found, word of mouth remains a key source of news in Sri Lanka. More communications research should be done to understand the overlapping spheres of inter-personal communications, legacy media dissemination and web/social media interactions. Insights from such research could help in formulating strategies to counter disinformation.

- **Media literacy matters:** More critical media consumers can serve as a bulwark against disinformation being uncritically shared by them. To achieve this, media and information literacy (MIL) should be promoted as an urgent national priority. The government, civil society organisations, academic institutions and the media industry should pursue strategies to promote MIL.

For media law-makers, policy makers and regulators

- **Streamline the existing patchwork of laws:** Sri Lanka needs a new policy and legal framework that responds to many changes in mass media, digital media and information consumption patterns. Such legal reforms should be carried out in a way that is fully consistent with internationally accepted norms for freedom of expression.
- **Enhance media's accountability:** Audiences have voiced their many concerns about legacy media wielding too much power without having adequate accountability. The print media's self-regulation attempts have not been effective and the broadcast sector has no accountability arrangement. In consultation with the media owners, media professionals, media sector trade unions and other associations, the state should establish a suitable independent mechanism for

Sri Lanka needs a new policy and legal framework that responds to many changes in mass media, digital media and information consumption patterns.

resolving complaints/grievances arising from the legacy media's lapses, excesses and ethical breaches.

- **Address the trust deficit in state-owned media:**

As revealed by this study, audiences believe the state-owned media to be more biased than privately owned ones. While the lack of audience trust is a common challenge for all media, the state should initiate media reforms to enhance audience trust in state media.

Ideally, the misuses and abuses of social media should be addressed by a policy and regulatory response that balances citizens' right to communicate with the need to maintain public order

- **Address the weaponisation of social media:** The temporary blocking of social media at times of crisis is a blunt regulatory measure. Ideally, the misuses and abuses of social media should be addressed by a policy and regulatory response that balances citizens' right to communicate with the need to maintain public order. The Ministries covering mass media, telecommunications and digital technologies should hold stakeholder consultations to agree on the best way forward while staying within the international framework for safeguarding freedom of expression.



Annex

Qualities audiences wish to see in news coverage

In focus group discussions held across Sri Lanka during March and April 2019, participants were asked what they think of their news, and also about the ideal attributes they associated with news and current information.

The following remarks (translated from Sinhala or Tamil in many cases) are among the large number of comments generated under this topic. The categorization has been done by the study team.

Attribute

Relevant expression by focus group participants

Trustworthy and evidence-based

“The Nittawo³⁷ news was proven as a hoax and still all the news channels kept talking about it just to increase their popularity. Then we lost trust in them...”

“In the Nittawo case, lots of people told the media they saw it, but there was no visual evidence to back it up...so they were most probably lying.”

“If some information comes from government channels (Rupavahini or ITN), we trust them more because we know they won't lie. They are not fast, but they give accurate information.”

“We can believe that a news story has actually happened when they show CCTV footage -- which is why TV is a more credible source for news...”

Accurate/Consistent

“Media tries to give news as fast as possible to be more popular... but quick news can be false and misleading!”

“We get a different version of the same news from different TV channels. One says 3 people have died and the other says 5 people have died. Some channels are very quick to give news but there is no point giving it fast if it is not accurate...”

“Weather reports (carried in media) need to be more accurate... as people living in landslide/flood prone areas depend a lot on such information.”

“Ten channels telecast the same news in 10 different ways. One channel says X people have died, whilst others say Y died. What are we to believe?”

37 Nittawo are a tribe of small hominids (perhaps similar to *Homo floresiensis*) believed to have lived in Sri Lanka – every now and then, media carries reports of a remnant being seen, creating much interest. <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/190331/news/is-it-a-bear-a-monkey-or-sri-lankas-own-hobbit-343247.html>

Attribute	Relevant expression by focus group participants
Detailed reporting: covering What, When, Where, Who, Why and How of a news story	<p>“They [media] should not just say 3 or 4 people have died and leave us hanging...we want to know the full story.”</p> <p>“Sometimes media hide the information or tell the first half of news, then show the footage and instead of voicing the rest of the story, they show text on video...I don’t like that.”</p> <p>“After an incident, the news says ‘vimarshanaya karamin pawathi’ (matter under investigation) -- but we never get to hear the outcome of such investigations. Why?”</p>
Relevant	<p>“Stories about people fighting on roads is not important to us. Media spends too much time on those, and not enough on what really matters to us – like the sena caterpillar pest: updates about it are very important because we have crop fields all around us.”</p> <p>“Recently a lady doctor driving a car met with a major road accident. When reporting the news, one channel said she was wearing red underwear which was visible after the incident, suggesting she was drunk. That was completely unnecessary!”</p>
Informative	<p>“We need clear information about benefits provided by the government – like loan facilities and subsidies. Not easy to find these!”</p> <p>“They should not make news a business. Sometimes there is an attractive headline, but the rest of the story is a complete waste of our time.”</p>
Clear and simple	<p>“Some news stories go on for about 5 or 10 minutes but we don’t know what it was all about! Sometimes the news shows Ministers arguing and we have no idea what they are arguing about. Even during the national budget debate, we saw ministers talking for hours and hours but we had no clue what they were going on about...”</p> <p>“News shouldn’t use sophisticated Sinhala language because not everyone can understand it...”</p>
Balanced	<p>“An ideal news bulletin is one that is balanced and covers all areas. Some news programs run for 30 minutes and only talk about politics for 20 minutes...we don’t like that.”</p> <p>“Most newspapers have politics and bloodshed on their front page. Instead they should have some positive news and feel-good news.”</p>

Attribute**Relevant expression by focus group participants**

"Youth prefer sports, entertainment and education related news whilst adults prefer politics, economy and other current affairs. So news shows should be balanced according to age and gender too."

Unbiased

"When Ranil Wickremesinghe was removed and Mahinda Rajapaksa was suddenly made Prime Minister (on 26 October 2018), there was a quick change in the news presented by (state owned) ITN. In the morning, they said good things about Wickremesinghe and by evening they were showing old songs singing praise of Rajapaksa! That's how some people got to know that the PM had changed!"

"Media needs to ask several people from different political parties to avoid biases... We want to know the views of the government and opposition."

"The presenter on 'Paththare Wisthare' (newspaper headline reading show on TV) reads a headline or article excerpt and adds his opinion, trying to influence the viewers. Instead he should just let viewers decide for themselves!"

Protect privacy of individuals

"...In rape cases, they should never show a picture of the victim as she won't be able to face society later...media should not destroy people's futures like that."

Timely

"We need to know new developments as and when it happens. If a strike is happening tomorrow, we need to know about it today so that we have time to prepare."

"If we know that oil prices are going up, we can quickly stock some oil or we'll have to wait in queues."

Based on multiple sources

"All the relevant authorities should confirm the given information. If it is a murder case, media should present the views of police, lawyers and witnesses."

Ethical and restrained use of sensitive visuals

"One local TV channel showed a medical student from Peradeniya University who had died by suicide, where her head was separated from the body. That was unwarranted: imagine how her parents would feel?"

Attribute	Relevant expression by focus group participants
	<p>“How Sri Lankan media handled the Christchurch mosque attack (March 2019) footage was very bad. They showed the attacker’s entire video over and over again! If it’s essential to show some sensitive visuals, TV stations should at least run a warning before doing so.”</p> <p>“In September 2001 when the World Trade Centre bombing happened, none of the foreign channels showed dead bodies. But in Sri Lanka, as soon as an atrocity happens, TV channels show everything because they want to be popular saying they showed it first and many people saw it!”</p>
Never advocating or inciting racism	<p>“During anti-Muslim violence, different channels were giving lots of information that added to the problem. They were showing violent pictures. Can such content be certified and approved by the government so that they are credible...?”</p>
Instructive	<p>“News should inform us on how to protect our children. If a kid has failed the university entrance exam (ALs), parents need to know how he can go to a technical college.”</p> <p>“A person has committed suicide as he could not repay a loan of LKR 1.5 million (USD 8,200). When showing stories like this, media can educate the public on how to be careful when it comes to managing money.”</p>



paving the way for good journalism

IMS is a non-profit organisation working to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.
www.mediasupport.org