

Television News in Times of Elections: A Case Study of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Electronic Media executes a crucial and major role in the elections. Through various studies, it has been ascertained that the degree to which the electronic media follows the guidance for accuracy, impartiality, and balance and the code of professional practice in covering the process of election, will directly affect the results of the outcomes of elections. The study has explored the degree to which the television stations of Sri Lanka abided by professional ethics in covering the elections and the behavior they exhibited during the period of elections. For this purpose, an analysis was done on the contents of news and current affairs programs of television stations during the local government election held in 2018. The study suggested that television stations disregard the code of professional ethics in covering the election by being partial to certain political parties and they include the news with the intention of promoting such political parties. It could also be ascertained that instead of reporting the factual truth, the television stations build up conclusive narratives according to a political agenda in covering the news and current affairs on the election. The study suggests there is a need for the application of the theory of news professionalism and the fairness doctrine during elections. Further, it highlights the need for laws and regulations and an independent electronic media authority that oversees the application of the fairness doctrine and media professionalism during elections and by extension, the strengthening of democracy in Sri Lanka.

Key Words: Television News, Media Professionalism, Code of Conduct, Elections, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

It is an emerging conclusion throughout the world that dissemination of misinformation is a severe threat to democracy. It was identified that disinformation or mal information which is disseminate that tend to confuse the people's mind purposely or for sake of profits is a various threat to human rights and democracy (Colomina et al., 2021; Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Pennycook et al., 2021; Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2022;). In an election held in a democratic society, if the mass media could cover the election in an accurate, balanced, impartial, objective and accountable manner which are the basic professional values, it could be considered as the essence for expressing the public opinion. In several studies conducted in Sri Lanka, it has been explored that television is the powerful organ used by the majority (Gunawardene, 2019; Weerasinghe and Handong, 2007). A voter could arrive at an informed decision at the voting booth, if he is empowered with accurate, balanced and impartial information.

Sri Lanka, is a country in South Asia with a population of twenty-two million and was a crown colony of the west for a long period of time obtaining freedom from the British in 1948. After obtaining freedom, when elections were held every five years, the political power to govern the country changed between two major political parties. Nevertheless, there are eighty political parties registered in the country which gives the impression of a multiparty system. Sinhalese form 75% of the population whilst Tamil population is 11% and Muslims form 9% of the population. The literacy level is 98% and digital literacy is 56%. International organizations have identified Sri Lanka as a middle-income country. Eighty percent of the population live in rural and suburban areas. The constitution has established an executive President, a legislative Parliament and the power has been decentralized among Provincial Councils and Local Government Councils. Representatives for Local Government Councils are elected covering the whole

island every five year through an election. The study is based on the content analysis of television news and current affairs programs of television stations during the Local Government Election held in 2018. The Election Laws pertinent to the mass media in Sri Lanka are the Constitution of 1978, the Presidential Election Act of 1981, the Parliamentary Elections Act of 1981, the Provincial Council Act of 1988, the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance of 2012, and the Elections (Special Provisions) Act, No. 14 of 2004 and 2011. The 2018 Local Government election related to this study was conducted under these legal provisions. After that, the 2019 presidential election and the 2020 general election were held under the same legal provisions. Thus, in all the elections held in Sri Lanka from 2018 to 2023, the same legal situation was pertinent to the mass media. Nevertheless, there was no change in the behavior of the mass media during the elections from 2018 to 2003.

Eighty percent of Sri Lanka's population lives in rural areas. There are fifty FM radio stations, twenty terrestrial television stations, twelve newspapers, and hundreds of news websites in Sri Lanka. At the beginning of the 1990s, the private sector was given the opportunity to enter the television media industry. There was no independent electronic media regulatory body or policy formulation for granting licenses to television stations and the political allies of the ruling government were given licenses to start television stations. As a result, television station owners use the television stations under their ownership for their own personal political and business agenda. Sri Lanka does not have an independent electronic media regulatory body, news media regulations, generally accepted television news ethics or code of conduct for news. Thus, television station owners have the opportunity to tailor news content according to their agenda. Nevertheless, owners of the television stations, directly and indirectly, interfere in the newsroom of television stations to achieve their political and business goals. Nevertheless, television news is being manipulated according to the political agenda of the owners rather than the practice of the news value and ethics. Gunawardene (2019) found that the main source of information for nearly 22 million people living in Sri Lanka is television news. Added, when it comes to news consumption, television is the most widely followed regular source of news and also the most trusted news media. 96% regularly watched domestic television channels for news (p.6).

Despite Sri Lanka being Asia's oldest democracy, critics claim the system has failed in the country, arguing that the absence of free and fair elections and the role played by radio and television stations during election campaigns are to blame. This study explores this argument from an academic perspective and awareness raising in society. As well, Sri Lanka was chosen as a case study with the expectation that a better understanding of news media professionalism will contribute towards strengthening democracy. In the study, attention was drawn to the role entrusted by the electronic news media during an election in a democratic society and how this role was played by television stations. For this purpose, the theory of media professionalism was employed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several theories that come into focus in the role of mass media in a democratic society. Among them the prominent theories are media professionalism and media logic. In line with media logic theory, mass media designs specific formats and contents to attract the viewers. It also includes the aspect of market competition. "The media logic thesis holds that the content of political news is the product of news values and format requirements that media make use of to attract news consumers" (Takens et al., 2013, p.277). Furthermore, Altheide and Snow (1991) suggest that media logic is a way of seeing and interpreting, how material is organized, the style in which presented the focus or emphasis. In the media professionalism theory, it does not exclude the media logic theory. Nevertheless, it is more concerned with media professionalism. There is a logical controversy that in pursuing media professionalism, media logic theory gets sidelined. Journalism literature pays more attention to journalistic professionalization. "Conventional wisdom holds that journalistic professionalization occurred in the twentieth century because of the

establishment of professional journalism schools, the introduction of codes of ethics, and the foundation of professional associations” (Banning, 1999, p. 160). In this study, the theory of media professionalism is tested.

Owners’ influence, job instability and insecurity, lack of professional ethos training, lack of regulation system, audience new behavior patterns have been identified by previous studies as obstacles for journalists to do their job professionally (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a). Nevertheless, Ruggiero et al. (2021) revealed “two dimensions of particular importance that help determine the degree and nature of journalistic professionalisation: the processes of education and professional training of information professionals and the growing issues related to their job insecurity. Both refer to the concept of journalistic autonomy” (p. 328).

Recent decades have witnessed increasing and informative debates on the role of mass media during election campaigns. “Information and ideas disseminated and debated during election periods influence public opinion and decision-making processes” (UNESCO, 2019, p.8). It has long been concluded that public service broadcast media must maintain impartiality and balance in election coverage:

Terrestrial broadcasters, allocated a portion of the public frequency spectrum, are accordingly obliged to serve the public. In particular, during elections, private broadcasters should also comply with a number of obligations regarding the fair and impartial coverage of elections, especially in their information programmes. (Kužel, 2020, p.16).

The influence of media owners in news gathering, producing and presenting has long been of concern (Curran & Seaton, 1997; Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Kneafsey, 2018; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Further, Langworth (2020) argued that the influence and self-interest of commercial media owners in maintaining their market dominance, through biased and distorted reporting in creating public opinion is a threat to democracy.

It is argued that news stories that are included or excluded in the news and current affairs programmes are picked to promote an ideology of a particular political party, and therefore should be regarded as a threat to democracy.

A study of the 2007 Danish elections shows that political parties exert pressure on the media for media content (Hopmann, et al., 2010). The IPI Hungary press freedom mission report (2022) which looked at the behaviour of media during the 2022 Hungarian elections, suggested that the government manipulated the media. Added:

This process has involved the coordinated exploitation of legal, regulatory and economic power to gain control of public media, to concentrate private media in the hands of allies, and to distort the market to the detriment of independent journalism. Hungary’s public service media has been reduced to an audiovisual propaganda tool of the ruling party. (IPI Hungary press freedom mission report, 2022, p.3-4).

Strategic game frame and horse race frames are used by journalists when covering elections. (Benoit et al., 2005; Sheaffer et al., 2008; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006; Zoizner, 2021). The strategic game frame approach of journalists is based on the phenomenon of correspond with attract audience attention, building the images of political parties and politicians, and the needs of time-saving easy news reporting. Election-related conflicts, personal focus, negative information, infotainment and the public’s interest in the drama genre influences strategic game frame news (Aalberg et al., 2012; Jang & Oh, 2016; Zoizner, 2021). Scholars argue that the media’s strategic news coverage has negative consequences, such as limiting citizen engagement in politics and avoiding make informed decisions in the polling booth. Zoizner (2021) investigated the consequences of strategic news coverage by the media during elections suggested that

“strategic coverage inhibits the development of an informed citizenship because the public is mostly familiar with the political rivalries instead of actually knowing what the substantive debate is about” (Zoizner , 2021, p.17).

De vrees (2003) engaged in a cross-national investigation of television reporting of the 1999 European elections in Britain, Denmark, and The Netherlands. De vrees, (2003) stated that “three aspects of the role of news organizations in shaping election news coverage are considered: the degree of organizational effort invested in the coverage, the editorial policies of the news organization and the application of news selection criteria” (De vrees, 2003, p.1). Kumar (2014) which carried out a study on elections held in India which is the immediate neighbor of Sri Lanka suggests that “since the 2009 general Election in India the word ‘paid news’ emerged as a major threat to democracy from the unholy alliance of politicians and few media organizations” (Kumar,2014, p. 128). Gonçalves et al., (2022) conducted a content analysis of articles and comments from three Portuguese news outlets during the 2015 legislative elections and explored the relationship between reporting strategies that emphasize partisan features, and online participation and incivility. Nevertheless, Cushion and Thomas (2015) through content analysis of television news during the 2015 UK General Election, investigate an intervention into debates about how impartiality is understood and interpreted. Further Satpathi and Rao (2011) examined the impact of the electronic media on the modern Indian voter.

In the Sri Lankan context, research on the behavior of television stations within democracy has been neglected. It is quite new in Sri Lanka to study the election from the perspective of the media. However, Center for Policy Alternative (CPA) and Deshapriya et al., have compiled observation reports on the behavior of mass media during the years 2000, and 2005. Further, in 2006 Weerasinghe and Hondong (2007) compiled a study on how the political agenda is built up in the news contents of television in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, a study has been done by Rao and Weerasinghe (2012) on how the media personnel of India and Sri Lanka practice the code of professional media ethics in the covering terror. In accordance with the study, mass media in Sri Lanka had been partial in the coverage of war. There was not much concern for the professional code of practices. There have been numerous studies done on media professionalism (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). In these studies, the aspects of objectivity, impartiality, accountability and factuality have been identified as basic professional media practices. McQuail (2000) recognized “main features of objectivity, adopting a position of detachment and neutrality, absence of subjectivity or personal involvement, partisanship or showing bias, strict attachment to accuracy, relevance and completeness” (p.172). Moreover, Sambrook (2012) states that in 1949, with the growth of broadcasting, the US government introduced the ‘Fairness Doctrine’ to regulate broadcasting. “This required the holders of broadcast licenses to present controversial issues of public importance in a manner that was, in the Federal Communication Commission’s view, honest, equitable, and balanced” (p.19). Conforming to Cushion and Thomas (2019) in the United Kingdom, impartiality is a legal requirement for broadcasters. As stated in Hanitzsch et al. (2011) comprehensive survey of journalists from 18 countries, “impartiality and the reliability of information, as well as adherence to universal ethical principles are considered essential journalistic functions worldwide” (p. 273).

In a liberalized political culture, media professionalism leads to the creation of an informed citizen who is empowered with all relevant information. Media professionalism is closely aligned to media ethics. International Journalists’ Associations, as well as Media firms such as Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, International Federation of Journalists, British Broadcasting Corporation and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation which are deemed to carry out their duties with professionalism, have published professional code of conduct which has to be followed by media practitioners during elections. It also argued that there are no universally accepted journalists’ professional code of conduct in the existing political systems and also within a digital media environment. There is yet another interpretation that media professionals face a challenge against the economic and political agenda of media barons and the

propaganda demand of the political party that is in power. It is also apparent that there are instances where the journalists themselves declare that media professionalism is unwanted and ignore the media ethics. However, in general there is a rich literature on media professionalism and acceptance of journalism as a profession. For example, Bossio ,2011; Cauldry ,2003; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Hallin ,2000; Miller ,2008; Nolan, 2008; Revers,2014; Rao and Weerasinghe ,2012; Tahat et al. 2020; and Zelizer (1992) have studied the importance of journalistic professionalism.

Free and fair elections are crucial in strengthening democracy in a country. It is necessary for the voter to be empowered with all the information pertaining to the election and electronic news media stations must play their role based on the principles of objectivity, accuracy, impartiality, factuality and accountability etc. The 'Fairness Doctrine' emphasizes that the application of impartiality by terrestrial radio and television stations is an essential factor because they use the public frequency spectrum, which is a limited public property. The above studies show that public and private mass media owners influence the content of the news rooms. The government's ability to influence the law, regulatory and economic power of the media industry and influence the content of state-owned media prevents it from acting professionally during elections. At the same time, the ability of private commercial media owners to influence newsrooms with their political and market agendas also leads to this sector disregarding professional ethics during elections. During an election season, the government in power uses the state-owned media for the party's propaganda, while the privately-owned media newsrooms work according to the political and market agendas of their owners.

The above literature review emphasizes that news media professionalism theory, media logic theory, editorial independence, political and market agenda of news media owners, news media regulations, lack of training, and job insecurity affect the professional performance of news outlets during an election.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis approaches have been utilized in previous studies of the news and covering of elections (Banerjee, 2001; EES, 2009; Gonçalves et al., 2022, Janne, 2006; Ultan ,2022; Kenney and Simpson, 1993; Platz, 2010). Krippendorff (2004) describes content analysis as a "research technique for making replicable and valid references from data to their context and content analysis provides new insights, increases a researcher understanding of particular phenomena or informs practical action" (p.8). Eurobarometer (2022) stated that content analysis was conducted on a sample of national news media in all 27 member states. "The study focuses on national television and newspapers because these media are consistently listed as the most important source of information" (Eurobarometer, 2022, p.54). Thus, the current study employed a conceptual content analysis with a descriptive element.

Election propaganda affects public opinion during an election campaign in a democratic country. Therefore, this study looks at the campaign period of the local government election announced by the Elections Commission.

Samples were selected from television stations, keeping in mind the television landscape in the country. For the purpose of this study nightly bulletins, and the morning newspaper review programmes on state-owned Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), Independent Television Network (ITN), and privately-owned Sirasa, Swarnavahini, Derana, and Hiru TV stations were analyzed for 22 days between January 20th and February 10th, 2018. In monitoring the news of TV stations, the study followed the main news bulletins of the six TV stations continuously, watching a total of 1,876 news stories which was a total of 3,960 minutes of airtime. Of that, 1,496 news stories deemed to have been either directly or indirectly dealing with the elections were analyzed.

Words, the sense of a word, sentence patterns and phrases, body language of presenters, videos and semantic elements of television news were subjected to conceptual content analysis in this study.

Thus, the extent to which concepts and principles of news media professionalism, news ethics, and guidelines set out by the Elections Commission were used in television news content were qualitatively and quantitatively examined. Accordingly, values such as accuracy, truthfulness, independence, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, and public accountability, the hallmarks of professional news delivery were selected for examination.

The structured system of observation was chosen to measure content. Categories and codes were determined based on a set of selected rules and increased the reliability and validity of the study. The way in which words, sentence patterns, phrases, videos, style of presentation, meanings, and how it relates to the professional news code of practices were concerns addressed in the research questions.

In data analysis, trends and patterns were identified by organising the data in order to address the research questions. Thus, a descriptive and comparative analysis was conducted keeping in mind the role of the news media in a democratic society during an election, guidelines set out by the Elections Commission, and internationally accepted news professional standards.

RESULTS

Coverage of political parties

The study considered the manner in which the various TV channels reported news of the political parties involved in the election, namely the four main contestants, the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) .

News that promotes or downplays a political party

In this study the news stories were also divided in to two groups; news that promoted a political party or attempted to make more popular according to the preference of the TV station, and those that the TV stations downplayed or harmed through the nature of the news story etc. Though some TV stations made an effort to present a balance in the coverage, other stations played scant respect to presenting a balanced picture.

The Table 1 shows the election coverage of the different television stations and details of promoting or downplaying a political party.

Table I. Election Coverage Of Television Stations

Television Channel	UPFA		UNP		SLPP		JVP	
	Prom	Downp’	Prom	Downp’	Prom	Downp’	Prom	Downp’
ABC TV 1	50	9	47	21	75	4	16	1
ABC TV 2	69	14	65	34	72	11	13	1
ABC TV 3	29	1	75	4	32	2	3	—
ABC TV 4	51	4	45	28	29	22	14	—
ABC TV 5	88	2	81	8	24	15	17	1
ABC TV 6	87	—	72	9	58	20	24	—
Total	374	30	385	104	290	74	87	3

1 United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA): a name of a political party

2 United National Party (UNP): a name of a political party

3 Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP): a name of a political party

4 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP): a name of a political party

Note: ABC TV 1, ABC TV 2, ABC TV 3, ABC TV 4, ABC TV 5, ABC TV 6: The ABC was used to denote the television stations selected for the sample

Note: Prom=Promote; Downp= Downplay

The table 1 indicates the number of news stories presented on the six TV stations that promoted the various political parties. The table 2 shows the number of news items that presented political parties negatively.

Table II. Number Of News Items That Presented Political Parties Negatively

Name of the political Party	Number of news stories that presented negatively
UPFA	30
UNP	104
SLPP	74
JVP	03

As the table 2 shows, the UNP was subjected to the most amount of adverse coverage during the nightly news bulletins. Negative coverage of the SLPP too was quite high, while the UPFA had much less of that while the JVP received very little bad coverage. Therefore, it can be concluded that the UNP was targeted for bad publicity, followed by the SLPP, and that the UPFA was treated less harshly. The JVP received the least negative coverage.

Promotional News (TV station wise)

The manner in which the different TV stations covered each political party indicated which party the station endorsed and which it did not. The table 3 shows the distribution of news on each station in terms of promoting a political party.

Table III. Promotional News Items (TVE Station Wise)

Name of political party	ABC TV 1	ABC TV 2	ABC TV 3	ABC TV 4	ABC TV 5	ABC TV 6
UPFA	87	88	51	29	69	50
UNP	72	81	45	75	65	47
SLPP	58	24	29	32	72	75
JVP	24	17	14	03	13	16

As the table 3 indicates, three of the TV stations, namely ABC 1, ABC 2 and ABC 3 promoted the UPFA, while the SLPP received more endorsement from ABC 5 and ABC 6. The UNP received more promotional news coverage on ABC 4.

Promotional news coverage closer to Election Day

The figure 1 shows the promotional news coverage on both the government owned and private television stations between February 1 and 7, – the run-up to Election Day.

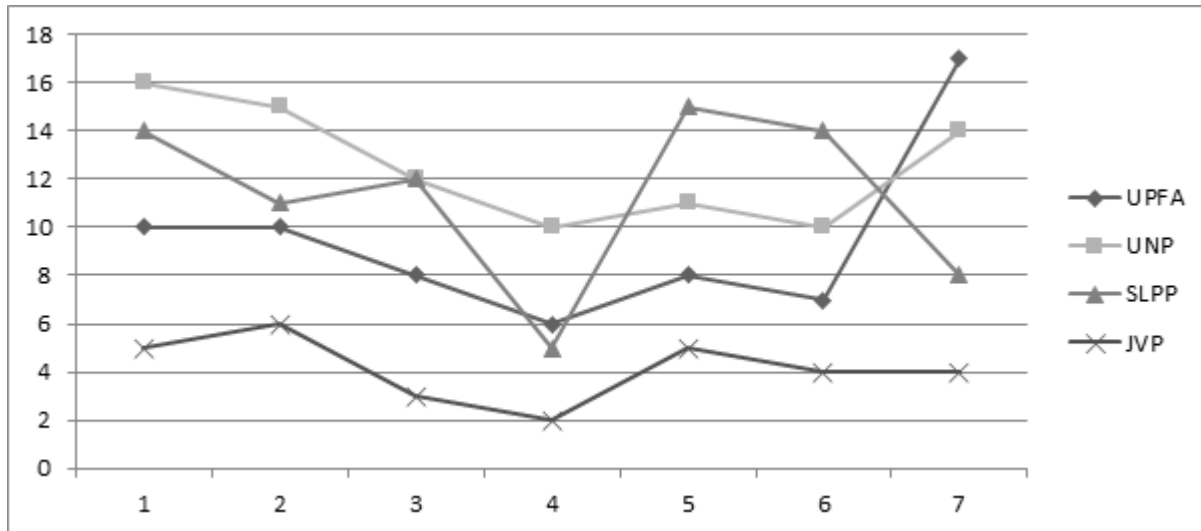


Fig. 1 Promotional news coverage closer to Election Day

As the figure 1 indicates, in the final days of the campaign, ie. February 1 -7, government -owned ABC TV1 aired 24 and 22 promotional news items involving the two parties in power, namely the UPFA and the UNP. On the other hand, the SLPP and JVP had 17 and 13 promotional news items. During that same period government-owned ABC TV 2 carried 27 and 29 promotional news items of the UPFA and the UNP respectively while the SLPP and the JVP had 9 and 11 respectively. As the figure 1 indicates, in the run up to the election, the UPFA and the UNP had more promotional news coverage on the government owned and private TV stations, while the SLPP and the JVP received much less positive exposure.

News that downplayed political parties (TV station wise)

Political parties were also subject to news that portrayed them in a negative light, according to the preferences of the TV stations. Those observations can be seen in the table 4.

Table IV. News That Downplayed Political Parties (TV Station Wise)

Name of political party	ABC TV 1	ABC TV 2	ABC TV 3	ABC TV 4	ABC TV 5	ABC TV 6
UPFA	Nil	02	04	01	09	09
UNP	09	08	28	04	34	21
SLPP	20	15	22	02	11	04
JVP	Nil	01	Nil	Nil	01	01

As the table 4 indicates, the lease negative coverage on TV was for the JVP. In fact, it received no negative coverage at all on ABCTV 1, ABC TV 3 and ABCTV 4. The three TV stations that did downplay the JVP was also limited to just one news item each. In the case of the UPFA, most of the TV stations limited its negative coverage, with government owned ABC TV 1 not televising any bad news about that party. In comparison, the UNP and the SLPP were downplayed on all TV stations, with the UNP being subjected to more negative coverage on private-owned ABCTV 5 and ABC TV 6, while government owned ABC TV 1 and ABCTV 2 treated the SLPP in a similar manner. Private-owned ABC4, meanwhile limited its negative

coverage of all parties.

Educating the voter

The evaluation also included the efforts made by the six TV stations to educate the voter on the Local Government election; adequate and accurate information on the new electoral system, election laws, how to cast the vote, counting of ballots etc. The figure 6 shows how each of the channels fared in educating the voter.

Table V. Efforts Made By The Tv Stations To Educate The Voter

Name of the television channel	Allocated percentage to educate the voter
ABC TV 1	15
ABC TV 2	29
ABC TV 3	03
ABC TV 4	26
ABC TV 5	11
ABC TV 6	17

Even though there should have been more news coverage to educate the voter on the new electoral system, some of the channels reviewed, failed to do so. However, during the silent period of February 8 and 9 as well as on election day, February 10 both government and privately owned channels gave priority to educating the public on the new system.

Behavior of Government -owned ABC TV 1 and ABC TV 2

The main news bulletins of the two government owned TV stations, ABC 1 and ABC 2 were evaluated during this period. In the legal sphere, electronic frequencies are considered scare public property, therefore, both government and private stations are expected to act responsibly towards the citizenry. Government media bears a direct responsibility in remaining fair and balanced.

The Table 6 indicates distribution of news content involving the two main political parties that contested the election on government-owned ABC1.

Table VI. Distribution Of News Items Among Political Parties By Government-Owned Abctv I

Distribution of news items	UPFA	UNP	SLPP	JVP
Promoting	89	71	69	22
Downplaying	Nil	09	20	Nil

As the table 6 shows the UPFA and the JVP were portrayed only in a positive light on ABCTV 1. Negative publicity involved only the UNP and the SLPP with there being 9 such news items regarding the former and 20 about the latter. As well, the two parties in government, the UNP and the UPFA had a total of 159 positive news items while the SLPP and the JVP had 82 of the same. This is a clear indication that the political parties did not receive equal treatment on the government owned ABCTV1.

The table 7 indicates the distribution of news content involving the four main political parties on government-owned ABCTV2.

Table VII. Distribution Of News Items Among Political Parties By Government-Owned Abctv Ii

Distribution of news items	UPFA	UNP	SLPP	JVP
Promoting	88	81	24	17
Downplaying	01	08	15	01

In the case of ABCTV2, the two government parties, the UPFA and the UNP, received 88 and 81 promotional news items respectively, making a total of 169. On the other hand, the parties in opposition, the SLPP and the JVP were positively portrayed only on 24 and 17 occasions respectively, with a total of 41 news items. Here, it can be concluded that government-owned ABCTV2 concentrated on downplaying the two opposition parties while promoting the two in government. Thus, not only did the two government-owned TV stations, which belong to the public fail to uphold media ethics and guidelines, closer to the election date such misuse increased.

Though Tables indicate that government -owned ABC TV 1 and ABC TV 2 carried more promotional news stories about the ruling party UPFA, and UNP, and fewer negative news items, the analysis indicated that in comparison there were more news items that downplayed the main opposition SLPP. On private-owned ABC TV 3, there seemed to be more promotional news about the UPFA and the JVP and fewer negative items, the number of news items that downplayed the UNP and the SLPP were far more. While private-owned ABC TV 4 on principle carried fewer negative items about all political parties, private-owned ABC TV 5 and ABC TV 6 concentrated on more negative news about the ruling parties, UPFA and UNP.

Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 show that, overall, television stations acted unprofessionally during the election campaign. Thus, accuracy, balance, impartiality, and objectivity of the code of professional practice in news media has been violated during the elections. ABC TV 1 and ABC TV 2 stations allocated more news stories to the promotion of UPFA and UNP alliance, the two parties in government. The privately -owned ABC TV 3 campaigned to bring the ruling parties to power in the 2015 elections. ABC TV 3 included more news stories in the promotion of the ruling party in this election as well. The privately owned ABC TV 5 and ABC TV 6 support the main opposition party, the SLPP. Thus, ABC TV 5 and ABC TV 6 stations have allocated more news stories to promote the opposition party and discredit the ruling party. Even though JVP is an opposition party, it does not pose a threat to the three main political parties, so TV stations have not paid much attention to the promotion of the JVP instead it is given negative promotion.

Short interview video clips/voice cuts

The use of short interviews is a television technique often seen on the main news bulletins. While these interviews were monitored during the data collection, special attention was paid to them during the period February 1-7, and special mention must be made that during this period, some stations aired these visual voice cuts only on certain days.

Table 8 provides details of the distribution of short interviews obtained from the different parties and aired on the stations. The numbers given within brackets against the names of the stations are those that were aired during the final week of the data collection.

Table VIII. Allocation Of Interviews For The Political Parties

Television Channel	Political Party				
	UPFA	UNP	SLPP	JVP	Other
ABC TV 2	12	19	10	10	

ABC TV 3	1	5	6	1	2
ABC TV 4	5	8	6	1	
ABC TV 5	9	11	10	5	1
ABC TV 6	1	1	1	1	

As shown in Table 8, more time was provided on ABCTV1, ABCTV2 and ABCTV5, for the short interviews feature as they televised it on 6, and 5 instances respectively. While the other TV stations did give this feature much prominence during the period of evaluation, by directly televising the campaign rallies, the views of the politician’s received exposure.

The use of the above-mentioned feature brought up some concerns; the main issue here was that the stations opted to use the same group of politicians to obtain views, and even though they belonged to the different political parties, their opinions got more publicity. As well, while this feature afforded a politician to criticize or make an accusation against another, the person who was subjected to such criticism or accusation was not afforded the opportunity to respond. It was also noted that this technique was popular amongst the politicians as they were happy to provide short visual sound bites for TV stations.

As the election campaign drew to a close, it was observed that the television stations were airing short interviews of the lesser-known political parties such as the Janasetha Peramuna and the United National Freedom Front. As these parties were seen to be criticizing one particular party, the question arose as to whether they were given publicity because the TV stations wanted to ensure that all parties were treated alike, or whether it was a tactic used to attack another party. Furthermore, though the main political parties received a fair degree of coverage, there were no interviews of politicians representing parties of the country’s minorities. Nor were non-Sinhala politicians from the main political parties interviewed. In this election, the nomination of, and electing women to Local Councils was mandated by law. However, there were hardly any short visual interview voice cuts of women contestants or politicians. Where they were invited to discussions, and debates too, it was limited to a few chosen women candidates and politicians. Another notable aspect in using short visual interview video clips was that in the days closer to the election, some TV stations began telecasting politicians singing on election stages, instead of using that facility to educate voters or discuss party policies.

Introducing a commentary segment into the newscast

While it is necessary to obtain a license to operate a television station in Sri Lanka, the number of licenses issued is also very limited. Therefore, it is ownership a television station license is a precious commodity and a privilege that others do not have. This privilege comes with a professional and social responsibility. Even though the goal of the license holder is to own a profitable business venture, during the licensing period, presenting accurate and impartial news is the greatest responsibility (Jayaweera, 2018). Despite that, some of the TV license holders did everything they could to indicate who they favored and also publicize their conclusions. For an example it was clear that the news and current affairs programs televised on ABCTV3, were produced according to an agenda, to work against the UNP leadership. Nevertheless, ABCTV4 afforded more time to UNP’s spokespersons Sagala Ratnayake and Ranjan Ramanayake as opposed to any others.

Nevertheless, those invited to comment in favor of those endorsed by the TV station and make conclusive statements were those in the employ of the said stations. This also begs the question whether those staff persons were the best suited to comment on these matters. This behavior is thus described by Jayaweera (2018) who states the other important fact is whether the person selected to comment on various views, is the person best suited to do that and of informing listeners and viewers of that fact.

Coverage for the final campaign rallies

All political and independent parties held their election rallies on February 7, to abide by campaign rules that state all political parties must cease election related activities by 12 midnight 48 hours prior to election day. As this caused practical problems for electronic media, special permission was granted by the Elections Commission, to air the final rallies on the evening TV news bulletins only on February 8 (during the silent period).

Given that these news items would be carried during the silent period, it was imperative that all campaign rallies received equal treatment on the news bulletins. The table 9 shows how each television station carried news of the last rallies of the four main contestants, the UPFA, UNP, SLPP and the JVP.

Table IX. Time Allocated For Coverage Of The Campaign Rallies

Television Station	Political party (time duration min)			
	UPFA	UNP	SLPP	JVP
ABC TV 1	4.37	4.34	1.25	3.58
ABC TV 2	3.3	3.23	1.1	2.14
ABC TV 3	4.42	2.52	3.32	2.00
ABC TV 4	3.09	4.02	3.00	2.35
ABC TV 5	4.26	4.57	4.41	3.32
ABC TV 6	3.00	3.06	3.12	1.05

When table 9 is analyzed, it can be concluded that the private channels, ABCTV3, ABCTV4, ABCTV 5 and ABCTV6 had allocated almost equal time slots for the UPFA, UNP and the SLPP. In this context, equal time was not considered according to the last second, but taken as a general average. It observed that apart from ABCTV3, the other channels had given due coverage for the JVP. Meanwhile, government owned ABCTV1 and ABCTV2 gave appropriate and equal coverage to the UPFA, UNP and the JVP, while the SLPP, it was noted, was not accorded similar equal coverage of their final rally. Of note, was that not only were the party leaders featured in the news, final rally coverage also gave publicity to views spoken by the second tier. The ABCTV3 station meanwhile, opted to carry news of two final rallies of the UNP; the one held in Colombo with its Leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe, and another held in Tissamaharama by Deputy Leader Sajith Premadasa. This was observed as being in contravention of media guidelines. Election Commissioners media guidelines indicates that providing excessive attention or favoritism is a violation guideline. Thus, this has more bearing during the silent period of an election campaign.

Program of Reading the morning newspapers

Four of the six television stations that were observed, have a morning program where the contents of daily and weekend newspapers are presented to viewers. Some of the TV channels attempted to make the above-mentioned program more professional by using relevant news items from the previous night's newscast, speaking to those mentioned in the newspapers, and introducing phone-ins. In analysing the morning newspapers, program observers concentrated on gathering qualitative data and analysing the behaviour of the presenter, the manner in which newspapers and the news was chosen and any particular agenda of the station. The analysis is given below.

ABCTV1: It was clear that the choice of newspapers and news items as well as the manner of presentation was partial to the government's agenda. Even when discussing news about opposition parties, there were

attempts to push forward the government's agenda. While visuals were used during the program and also clips from election rallies, again political parties within the government received more exposure than those in opposition. It was observed that there were more news stories about the UPFA and the UNP, while the JVP received much less exposure. The SLPP received even less.

ABCTV 6: At first glance it would seem that all relevant news items for the day were being presented. However, a closer look showed that a limited number of newspapers were chosen for presentation and that certain newspapers were not featured often. In selecting news stories too, it was revealed that the focus was on those that had some impact on certain political parties. As well, the program presenter offered his interpretation or conclusion, thereby affecting the final decision of the viewer. This was more obvious when presenting cartoons, where the program presenter would try to give his views.

ABCTV 4: In this program only a limited number of newspapers and news stories were picked for presentation. This resulted in certain current news items being overlooked. However, there was an effort to present news that was directly and indirectly related to the election as well as other news of the day. Another salient point was that news relating to all political parties was shared and the presenter did not attempt to offer his or her conclusions on the items selected.

ABCTV5: Even though the program has a limited time frame, there was an effort to present all news items from all of the newspapers. However, it was noted that a greater attempt was made to highlight news that would have a powerful effect and cause more concern amongst the people. It was also noted that the emotional tone and body language of the program presenter conveyed certain messages to the viewer. Another observation was that there was no attempt to present certain news items in fair manner and that the program presenter's (host's) views, conclusions on the news story were also shared.

DISCUSSIONS

There is a code of conduct for print media published by the Editors Guild of Sri Lanka. It is applicable only to the newspapers which have obtained the membership of the Editors Guild. There is no code of conduct accepted in general and compiled by the authorities and ownership of government owned and privately owned television firms even though they utilize the publicly owned scarce resource of electronic frequency and spectrum. There is no legal requirement in Sri Lanka, that television stations are ethically responsible for public interest or that they have a social responsibility for such use. As stated in Hanitzsch et al. (2011) comprehensive survey of journalists from 18 countries, "impartiality and the reliability of information, as well as adherence to universal ethical principles are considered essential journalistic functions worldwide" (p. 273). Media professionalism is closely aligned to media ethics. International Journalists' Associations, as well as Media firms such as Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, International Federation of Journalists, British Broadcasting Corporation and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation which are deemed to carry out their duties with professionalism, have published professional code of conduct which has to be followed by media practitioners during elections.

Granting of licenses for private sector owned television stations is done in a secretive and hidden manner. In such instances, those who are close to the government in power become beneficiaries to commence television stations. There is no clause in the license issued regarding code of conduct to be followed. In accordance with the license conditions issued by the government, there is no restriction on a licensee to transfer or sell his license to another person. Thus, a candidate contesting the election has the ability to own these licenses and use those television stations for his election campaign. This situation not only unfairly affects election candidates who do not have television station ownership, ownership support or licensing, but is also a serious threat to democracy. As officially declared by the government, the grant of licenses for new television stations is finished and over. The commissioner of elections issues a set of guidelines for the mass media to follow during the elections. Nevertheless, the privately owned television stations are not

legally bound to follow the guidelines even the state-owned television stations are bound to follow the guidelines regarding the requirement that state property should not be used for election campaigns of political parties as it is prohibited by law. There are arguments surfaced to indicate that the election commission of Sri Lanka is not an independent or powerful institution. Thus, the election commission is not empowered to interrupt the partial or fake news or unethical practices that relate the media code of conduct committed by electronic news media during the period of elections.

Thus, the media owners have got the opportunity to influence the newsroom under their ownership to narrate the news content according to their political and business agenda. Nevertheless, current study has confirmed the conclusions identified by previous studies. The influence of media owners in news gathering, producing and presenting has long been of concern (Curran & Seaton, 1997; Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Kneafsey, 2018; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Further, Langworth (2020) argued that the influence and self-interest of commercial media owners in maintaining their market dominance, through biased and distorted reporting in creating public opinion is a threat to democracy.

The IPI Hungary press freedom mission report (2022), which studied mass media behavior during the 2022 Hungarian elections, suggested that the government was manipulated the mass media. Thus, current study has confirmed the conclusions identified by previous studies that the professionalism of the news media is being violated due to media ownership influencing the news content and processing the news content according to their political agenda.

Strategic game frames and horse race frames are used by journalists when covering elections (Benoit et al., 2005; Sheafer et al., 2008; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). Zoizner (2021) who studied the consequences of strategic news coverage by the media during elections suggested that “strategic coverage inhibits the development of informed citizenship because the public is most familiar with political rivalries instead of actually knowing what the substantive debate is about” (p.17). Election-related conflicts, personal focus, negative information, infotainment and the public’s interest in the drama genre influence strategic game frame news (Aalberg et al., 2012; Jang & Oh, 2016; Zoizner, 2021). Thus, the current study confirmed the conclusions reached by previous studies that instead of creating an informed voter, the news media engages in strategies to attract an audience during the election.

In countries, where a developed system for elections is established, there are regulations and laws introduced to ensure that electronic news media functions impartially during the period of elections. According to Prof. Justin of the department of communication, Cardiff university, if there was no law introduced for electronic media regulation for the purpose of impartiality, the labor party would not have been able to secure such a number of seats in the election held in 2017 in Britain (Jayaweera, 2022). In accordance with media regulatory law in Britain, electronic media are legally bound to uphold impartiality during the period of elections.

Commenting on how this condition influences the public opinion which should be expressed accurately during the elections in democratic society, Jayaweera (2018) suggests that essence of the law and regulations to ensure the electronic news media adheres to the impartiality during election period, is to minimize the capacity of the owners of electronic news media to steer the public opinion and decisions according to his own direction. Thus, raking refuge under the fact that one has the right to express his own ideas, the electronic news media licensee does not get the capability to not to give the rights to others who hold different views to express their ideas through the specific electronic media station. In fact, impartiality can be achieved and secured when programmes inclusive of controversial issues are telecasted where a variety of ideologies emerge and get discussed. The electronic news media run through the usage of frequency of the electronic spectrum which is a limited public property. Hence the frequency spectrum cannot be used for purposes which contradict public interest. Kužel (2020) suggests that “during elections,

private broadcasters should also comply with a number of obligations regarding the fair and impartial coverage of elections, especially in their information programmes” (p.16). Thus, previous studies have identified that television stations that use the public frequency spectrum, cover the election without considering the impartiality doctrine. This was confirmed in the current study as well.

The findings in this study confirmed conclusions arrived at in previous studies. Zoizner (2021) who studied the consequences of strategic news coverage by the media during elections suggested that because journalists cultivate a specific knowledge about politics that foster political alienation, rather than helping citizens make a rational decision based on substantive information, it erodes the informative value of media.

CONCLUSION

Elections held every five years are the foremost democratic activity in which the public will participate. If the voter could be empowered with impartial, balanced and accurate information and diversity of opinions prior to voting, the real public opinion will get expressed. Citizens could be empowered with accurate and impartial information and a diversity of opinions for him to make a decision on whom to vote for depending on the fact all the electronic media stations conduct their role based on mass media professionalism and code of practices. The studies done recently in Sri Lanka explored that the most powerful and influential source of information is television. Do the television stations comply with the role they have been entrusted during the period of election in a democratic society? This problem formed the basis for the study. For this purpose, television news and current affairs program contents during the local government election held in 2018 were analyzed. It was also examined whether the television stations followed the guidelines that are specified by International Journalists’ Federation, Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, BBC, Editors Guild of Sri Lanka and the guidelines issued by the Commission of Elections on how the mass media should behave during an election.

This study was based on media professionalism and the fairness doctrine. As previous studies indicate, violations of media professionalism occur because media content is framed according to the political and market agenda of media owners. While earlier studies extensively investigated the practice of media professionalism theory, the current research was narrowed down to television news from the fairness doctrine perspective to get new insight into the theory. While the current research confirms previous findings, it also suggests that television stations which have the privilege of using limited public property, lose their editorial independence during election campaigns.

At such times, instead of distributing factual truth by conforming to news media professionalism and fairness doctrine of terrestrial broadcasting, television stations focus on the political and business agenda of media owners. This study found that television newsrooms constructed narratives instead of professional news reporting, to reflect the media owners’ political and business agenda. For that, strategies such as image building, non-reporting, selecting preferred news stories, setting priorities, confusing viewers, audio and visual effects, emotions and tone of presenters, disinformation and mal information etc. were utilised, misusing the inherent strength of the television medium.

Terrestrial broadcasters, especially television media utilise a portion of the public frequency spectrum to influence the decisions of the public by using the capabilities available to television. Thus, media owners capitalise on the laws and regulations of the government in power on state-owned media, the financial power of privately-owned media owners, job insecurity of journalists,’ lack of training and professional journalists’ unions, and the absence of regulations to safeguard fairness doctrine and news media professionalism, to influence editorial independence.

This study reinforces the fact that non-professional news reporting methods of television stations are a threat to the country’s democratic process, during elections. The study also suggests there is a need for the

application of the theory of news professionalism and the fairness doctrine during elections. Further, it highlights the need for laws and regulations and an independent electronic media authority that oversees the application of the fairness doctrine and media professionalism during elections and by extension, the strengthening of democracy in Sri Lanka.

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