

RESEARCH BRIEF

Racial profiling and language polarisation in Sri Lankan media: A problem highlighted by “*Ethics Eye*” and “*The Divide*”

SEPTEMBER 2021



INTRODUCTION

Ethics Eye, and The Divide are social media platforms by Verité Research which flag media ethical violations and problematic media behaviour in Sri Lanka.¹ Since its inception in 2016, some of the key ethical violations *Ethics Eye* has been problematising include racial profiling, gender stereotyping, suicide related reporting and reporting on child abuse. Among these, the two key issues that have negative social ramifications on minorities are: (1) racial profiling; and (2) language polarisation.

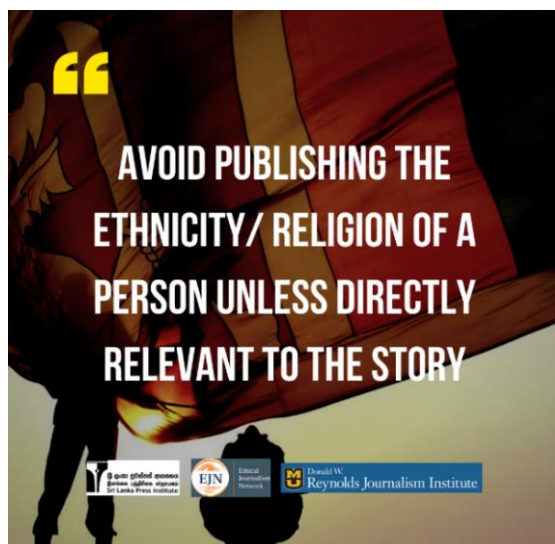
This research brief aims to provide a short introduction to these two areas. The brief is presented in two parts. First, it will introduce the phenomenon of racial profiling and provide examples from the Sri Lankan media. Second, it will introduce the phenomenon of language polarisation and provide relevant examples.

RACIAL PROFILING

Some of the Sri Lankan mainstream media tends to promote prejudicial content towards minorities and/or highlight the ethnoreligious identity of the minorities in negative contexts even when that identity is irrelevant to the news/story. These practices intensified following the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 and the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

In order to reduce these violations of ethical reporting guidelines, *Ethics Eye* regularly monitors the Sri Lankan media and flags unethical content via its social media handles. To this end, *Ethics Eye* relies on both globally and locally accepted media guidelines with regard to ethical reporting. Exhibit-1 depicts two of the guidelines adopted in evaluating content.

Exhibit-1:



¹ *Ethics Eye* is a research-based public education platform managed by Verité Research that serves to foster ethical journalism in Sri Lanka. To access the site, see: <https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye> and <https://twitter.com/EthicsEye>.

The *Ethics Eye* team advances media accountability on unethical reporting pertaining to ethnoreligious minorities using three approaches. First, *Ethics Eye* publishes regular posts on its social media pages exposing unethical content on minorities. As shown in Exhibit-II, each post identifies the ethical violation pertaining to minorities in a selected news article along with the newspaper that carried it.

Exhibit-II:

Context: In the above news story, the newspaper highlighted the ethnicity of a suspect as a 'Muslim individual' when it was not directly relevant to the story.

Context: The above post features two news stories. In both instances, the newspaper highlighted the ethnicity of the suspects as 'Muslim' and 'Tamil woman' respectively. As visible from these examples, the Sri Lankan media often highlights the ethnicity of individuals when it is discussed in a negative context.

Second, *Ethics Eye* juxtaposes unethical reporting with ethical reporting on a common incident pertaining to ethnoreligious minorities. Through this juxtaposition, *Ethics Eye* prompts journalists, editors, and media owners to evaluate how competing media organisations reported on a certain issue. Exhibit-III illustrates two such examples.

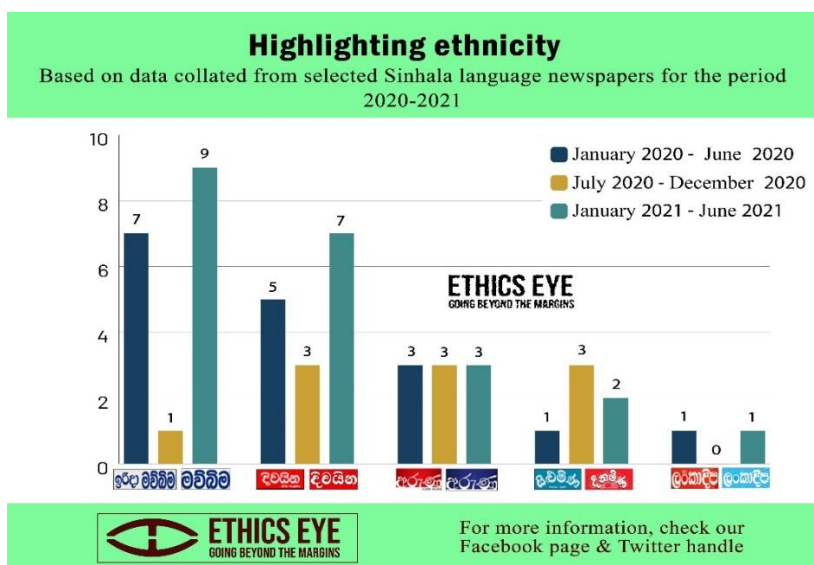
Exhibit-III:

Context: The above post features three news stories on an incident pertaining to drug smuggling. Two newspapers revealed the ethnicity of the suspects as 'Tamil individuals'. However, Lankadeepa reported the same story without revealing the ethnicity of the suspects.

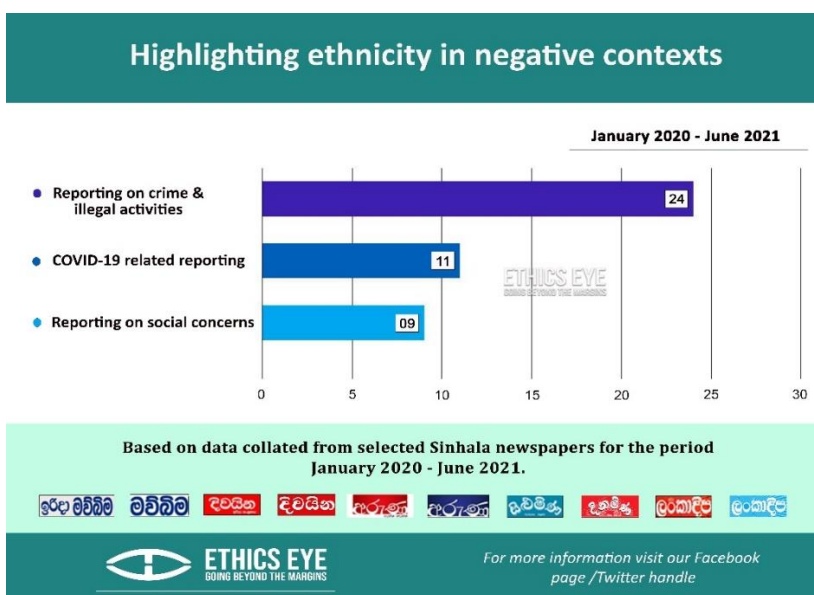
Context: Two newspapers reported on an incident involving a doctor who allegedly took photographs of another female doctor while changing clothes at the Ragama hospital. Divaina highlighted the ethnicity of the suspect as 'Muslim'. By contrast, Lankadeepa reported the same news without mentioning the ethnicity.

Third, Ethics Eye cumulates its data to evaluate ethical violations pertaining to coverage of ethnoreligious minorities during a specific time period. As shown in Exhibit-IV, the team published two infographics comparing the number of media violations concerning ethnoreligious minorities for the years 2020 and 2021.

Exhibit-IV:



Context: The above infographic features a quantitative trend analysis of unethical reporting in the Sinhala newspapers for the period January 2020 – June 2021.



Context: The above infographic provides a quantitative breakdown of unethical reporting related to ethnicity classified by the type of news story for the period January 2020 – June 2021.

LANGUAGE POLARISATION

In addition to the problem of racial profiling, the Sri Lankan media also has a problem of being polarised across languages. The prevalence of multiple linguistic identities in the country has resulted in the evolution of three distinct spheres of media based on the three main languages used– Sinhala, Tamil and English. While English language media is accessed by the relatively elite/educated in Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil media– especially press–cater to large distinct demographics of the country.

In order to bridge the divide in media reporting, *The Divide*, a social media platform launched in 2018, regularly flags instances of media polarisation in Sinhala and Tamil media.² As illustrated in Exhibit-V, the team highlights media polarisation by juxtaposing reportage on a common issue or event appearing in the Sinhala and Tamil language media.

Exhibit-V:

EASTER SUNDAY ATTACKS: SINHALA MEDIA SAYS CAUSED BY GLOBAL FACTORS, TAMIL MEDIA SAYS CAUSED BY LOCAL FACTORS

The PCoI report on the Easter Sunday attacks notes that 'internationally, the activities of the Islamic State' and 'locally, the activities of extremist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena' contributed to the attacks

Sinhala media	Tamil media
Some Sinhala media claimed that 'Islamic extremism' in Sri Lanka is a global factor that was not caused by Buddhist extremism' or the 'Bodu Bala Sena'	Some Tamil media echoed part of the PCoI's findings that locally , 'Buddhist extremism' was a 'main cause for the establishment of Islamic extremism in Sri Lanka'

Context: Following the release of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) report into the Easter Sunday attacks, the Sinhala and Tamil media diverged in identifying the causes of the attack. The Sinhala media attributed the attacks to 'global factors'. Meanwhile, the Tamil media attributed it to 'local factors'.

END OF THE WAR: CELEBRATIONS OR COMMEMORATIONS?

SINHALA PRESS	TAMIL PRESS
The 12th celebration of the [war] victory is today	Mullivaikkal remembrance commemorated emotionally; commemorations in the North, East and abroad
12 years since the [war] victory	Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day: The TNA that commemorated at the parliamentary complex
The 12th National War Heroes' celebration to be held today	May 18 remembrance commemorated amidst the pandemic and oppression; emotional tribute in the North, East and abroad
Today is the 12th celebration of the [war] victory	TNA MPs who were in black attire paid their respects by lighting lamps at the parliamentary complex
12 years since the [war] victory	Tamil MPs not allowed to express their remarks on war tragedies; Sumanthiran's mike muted by the speaker; the praising and congratulating of the military were allowed
The 12th celebration of the [war] victory to be held today headed by the president	
Arrived wearing black: TNA MPs light candles in parliament	

Based on the front pages of selected Sinhala & Tamil language newspapers on 19 May 2021

Context: 12 years following the end of the armed conflict, the Sinhala and Tamil media diverged in reflecting on the end of the war. Most Sinhala newspapers viewed it as a 'celebration'. By contrast, most Tamil newspapers viewed it as a 'commemoration'.

² *The Divide* publishes its content via the TMA Twitter handle and the Verité Research Instagram handle. For more information, see: https://twitter.com/verite_tma and <https://www.instagram.com/veriteresearch/>.

VOTE ON UNHRC RESOLUTION: FAVOURABLE OR UNFAVOURABLE OUTCOME?

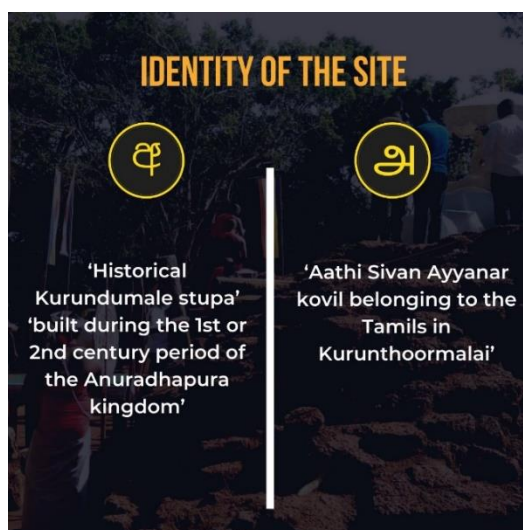
On 23 March, Resolution 46/L.1/Rev.1 on Sri Lanka was adopted with 22 votes in favour and 11 votes against. 14 countries abstained from voting





 Sinhala media	 Tamil media
<p>Some Sinhala media cast the voting outcome as favourable for Sri Lanka as the 'majority of the countries supported Sri Lanka', with '14 countries abstaining from voting since they did not agree with the resolution'</p>	<p>Some Tamil media cast the 'resolution that was passed with 22 votes' as unfavourable for the 'Sri Lankan government' as it signalled 'diplomatic defeat'</p>

THE MEDIA ANALYSIS

Context: On 23 March 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed Resolution 46/L.1/Rev.1 on Sri Lanka. Following the adoption of the resolution, the Sinhala and Tamil media presented contrasting views. The Sinhala media reflected on the voting outcome as favourable for Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the Tamil media reflected on the voting outcome as unfavourable for Sri Lanka.



 IDENTITY OF THE SITE	
<p>'Historical Kurundumale stupa' 'built during the 1st or 2nd century period of the Anuradhapura kingdom'</p>	<p>'Aathi Sivan Ayyanar kovil belonging to the Tamils in Kurunthoormalai'</p>



 INCIDENT AT THE SITE	
<p>'Conservation efforts at the site' began after 'religious observances were led by Buddhist monks'; 'Military officials' and 'officials of the archaeological department' joined the proceedings</p>	<p>The 'military arranged' the 'Buddhist religious proceedings', which were held 'in violation of the health guidelines'; '30 Buddhist monks chanted <i>pirith</i>' and a 'Buddha statue was erected to convert Kurunthoormali to a Buddhist site'</p>

Context: In May 2021, the Sinhala and Tamil press reported on an incident relating to a sacred site in Mullaitivu. The two-language press presented contrasting views on the identity of the site and the incident that occurred at the site. For instance, the Sinhala press identified the site as the 'historical Kurundumale stupa', a Buddhist religious site. Meanwhile, the Tamil press identified it as the 'Aathi Sivan Ayyanar Kovil', a Hindu religious site.

The problem of polarisation across languages extends to television coverage as well. Exhibit-VI provides two instances when the Sinhala and Tamil TV channels disproportionately covered an incident.

Exhibit-VI:

40 YEARS SINCE THE BURNING OF THE JAFFNA LIBRARY: HOW DID TV CHANNELS COVER IT?

TAMIL TV CHANNELS

Focused on: the value of the Jaffna library, the history behind the burning, the death of Rev. David, military presence allegedly obstructing attempts to commemorate the 40th anniversary and the Jaffna deputy mayor's statement

SINHALA TV CHANNELS

NO COVERAGE

Based on prime time news telecasts of selected Sinhala & Tamil language channels on June 1

Context: May 2021, marked 40 years since the burning of the Jaffna Public Library. Only the Tamil language TV channels covered the anniversary of the incident. Meanwhile, the Sinhala language TV channel did not cover the incident.

31 YEARS SINCE THE KOKAVIL ATTACK: HOW DID TV CHANNELS COVER IT?

SINHALA TV CHANNELS

Focused on: the history of the attack, the sacrifice of Capt. Saliya Aladeniya and the commemorative event held. Additionally, Derana featured statements made by General Daya Ratnayake, Prof. Raj Somadeva and Indrani Aladeniya

TAMIL TV CHANNELS

NO COVERAGE

Based on prime time news telecasts of selected Sinhala & Tamil language channels on July 11

Context: 11 July 2021, marked 31 years since the Kokavil attack. Most Sinhala language TV channels covered the anniversary of the incident. Meanwhile, the Tamil language TV channels did not cover the incident.