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## Internet and media freedom: A study of media censorship in Sri Lanka and the effectiveness of web-based revel media

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# Internet And Media Freedom: A Study Of Media Censorship In Sri Lanka And The Effectiveness Of Web-Based Rebel Media

*Sri Lanka, the former British colony of Ceylon, is the theatre for one of the world's longest and bloodiest civil wars. For more than two-and-a-half decades the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have fought to secure a separate Tamil state from the country's predominantly Sinhalese government. However, the reportage of the conflict has remained a monopoly of the government and the pro-Sinhala mainstream media. This paper argues that alternative media such as the Internet has given the LTTE and pro-liberation supporters a media outlet which is not easily censored, shut or distorted by governments and mainstream media groups. The alternative rebel media, however, does not imply an emergence of media freedom in Sri Lanka, and merely suggest the availability of an outlet for 'news' usually not supported by mainstream media. The paper does not necessarily support either the Eelam cause or the Sri Lankan government, and merely identifies the reasons for, and observes the successes and flaws of, web-based pro-Eelam media.*

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**I**n a post-modernist world where the logic of late capitalism is redefining the notion of statehood, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are fighting for Eelam - a separate State in northern Sri Lanka. Their concept of nationhood is rooted in modernist thinking and transcends geographic boundaries, and is inclusive of more than 50 million Tamil speaking people scattered throughout the world. Their diaspora is held together, and informed of the Eelam struggle, through an elaborate propaganda and information network which relies heavily on the Internet. This media network also plays a vital role in de-demonising the LTTE, and attempts to transfer its terrorist image on to the Sri Lankan government.

Traditional media outlooks and government regulations over the last forty years, have paved the way for both a pro-government

media which acts as a quasi-propaganda machine for the government, and a mainstream media which is not necessarily pro-government but is usually anti-Eelam. The political views of both groups have to a significant extent, determined the coverage of the Eelam war. In this climate, pro-Eelam groups have turned to the Internet, which provides them with effectively an uncensorable medium for both LTTE propaganda and pro-Eelam news. In most cases the pro-Eelamist's 'news' is as skewed as that of the government owned media, but nevertheless it offers an alternative news outlet to counter or respond to 'government propaganda'.

Sri Lanka the former British colony of Ceylon is home to more than 19.5 million people - 74% Sinhalese and 18% Tamil (Central Intelligence Agency, 2002). The country is also the arena for one of the world's longest and bloodiest civil wars - one waged between the predominantly Sinhala government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

While the roots of the conflict run deep, a key turning point was the country's ethnic rift falls in 1976 with the signing of the Vaddukoddai resolution (DeSilva, 1998). The resolution is central to the conflict in that with it, Tamil politicians led by Samuel James Vellupillai Chelvanayagam openly declared for the first time the need for a separate Tamil State – an Eelam nation. While Chelvanayagam himself was a pacifist, his concept of Eelam laid the ideological foundation for a number of youth groups which believed in 'fighting' for their state as opposed to 'demonstrating' for it.

The Tamil New Tigers, which later become the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was one of many rebels groups formed in the 1970's following the Vaddukoddai resolution. By the mid 1980's the Tigers had become the dominant militant liberation group on the Jaffna peninsula (Swamy, 1994).

Today the LTTE is proscribed as a terrorist group in a number of countries including Australia (2001), Britain (2001), India (1991) and the United States (1997). The LTTE has been charged with assassinating heads of state in two countries - Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India and President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka. They are also alleged to have carried out more than 200 suicide bombings since the 1980's - the highest hit-rate for any terrorist group (Schweitzer, 2000).

## **Government control of the media**

Since the late 1950's Sri Lankan mainstream media has been heavily censored and controlled by the government. It was initiated

## **The Tamil Struggle**

after only a decade of post-independence press freedom, when Prime Minister Solomon West Ridgeway Dias (SWRD) Bandaranaike responded to the 1958 communal riots by imposing a State of Emergency, and with it, press censorship (Senadhira, 1996).

The 1956-1958 period is also considered by many political commentators as the starting point of the ethnic rift between the Sinhalese and Tamil people. The passage of Bandaranaike's controversial Official Language Act (1956), which is colloquially known as the 'Sinhala Only' policy, not only linguistically sidelined Tamil speakers in government service. It also sparked the first ethnic riots in post-independent Ceylon.

Following the 1958 ethnic riots Bandaranaike was able to secure parliamentary approval for a Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act, and subsequently lifted both the State of Emergency and press censorship. But once unleashed, both racial violence and media censorship continued to plague the island nation for nearly half a century.

While SWRD Bandaranaike had perhaps the dubious honour of being father of press censorship in Sri Lanka, successive governments including that of his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Junius Richard Jayewardene, tightened their grip on the nation's fledgling independent media through a raft of legislation including the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon (Special Provisions) Act of 1973, which legitimised government control of Sri Lanka's largest newspaper group.

### **Constitutional loopholes and Parliamentary bills which curb the press**

While Jayewardene's 1978 constitution guaranteed fundamental rights, including those relating to "freedom of expression", Article 15(7) of Chapter 3, contained a legal loophole stating that all rights may be restricted by law in "the interests of national security, public order and the protection of public health and morality, or for the purposes of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others, or of meeting the just requirements of the general welfare of democratic society."

Further still, Article 16 stated that all laws "written and unwritten" and in existence at the time, would remain valid regardless of whether they were consistent with the fundamental rights chapter (Law & Society Trust, 2002). Under Article 16, Sirimavo Bandaranaike's 1973 Sri Lanka Press Council Bill - which established a largely state-appointed media censorship and regulatory body - was duly incorporated to Jayewardene's legal and constitutional framework (Senadhira, 1996).

The Press Council Bill also included laws on criminal defamation – laws which have been used by successive governments since to persecute a number of newspaper editors including *The Sunday Times* editor Sinha Ratnatunga (in July 1997) and *The Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga (in 2000). Both were given suspended sentences for defaming President Chandrika Kumaratunga (Freedom Forum, 2000).

A year after the 1978 Constitution was adopted supposedly enshrining fundamental rights, Jayewardene enacted the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act No. 48, legalising the arrest of any person with or without a warrant and permitting their detention for a period of up to 18 months without a court order. The act was used by both Jayewardene and subsequent governments to arrest and detain journalists.

Heavy-handed legislative controls, coupled with the forcible closure of newspapers, and the harassment of journalists, have made it very difficult for views opposed to those of the government to find an objective outlet in traditional media.

For the LTTE rebels, who are anti-government by their very nature, finding a forum to have political views heard has been virtually impossible. Government media control meant sympathetic (or even politically neutral) journalists were removed from areas in close proximity to the LTTE. Newspapers which had once been prepared to report on the LTTE perspective were shut down. The government stranglehold also saw many journalists interrogated and harassed for simply interviewing LTTE representatives, while other media personnel were banned from entering LTTE territory. Thus the LTTE who could not freely travel to the south of the country for interviews, could not even bring the media to them.

In July 1983, the first Tamil Tiger attack on the Sri Lankan military was followed by days of island-wide anti-Tamil ethnic violence. President Jayewardene's handling of the crisis was heavily criticised by Jaffna based Sinhala journalist and editor of *The Saturday Review*, Gamini Navaratne. In retaliation, the Jayewardene government banned *The Review* with immediate effect. Although the ban was later lifted, Navaratne was required to present all of his copy to the government censor before publication (Senadhira, 1996).

Jaffna also had thriving local newspaper culture in the early stages of the Eelam war. In 1987 prior to the Indian Peace Keeping Force's (IPKF) deployment in the Tiger-held north and east, Jaffna was home to four Tamil newspapers Murasoli, Eelamurasu, Uthayan and Eelanadu. Within a few months of the IPKF's arrival, Eelamurasu journalists were arrested and their office was destroyed

## Curbing The Jaffna Press

(Tamilnet, 2002a). A few years later, *Uthayan* and *Eelanadu*, the only two newspapers which survived the IPKF, were hit by a newsprint embargo imposed by President Ranasinghe Premadasa (1991). While *Uthayan* was able to successfully circumvent the newsprint restrictions the fact remains the embargo was a clear attempt to curb the Jaffna press. In 2000, *Uthayan* was banned by the Kumaratunga government for “acting maliciously and detrimentally in publishing information that is biased to the LTTE” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2000).

## Consequences of interviewing the Tamil Tigers

On numerous occasions journalists have been accused of supporting the Tigers or are branded as sympathisers simply for interviewing the LTTE or for trying to balance government propaganda with rebel propaganda. In 2001 *Uthayan's* Deputy-Editor, M. Vithyathara, was interrogated by police and asked to reveal the names of those who helped him meet the LTTE hierarchy, following the publication of an interview with the LTTE chief negotiator the previous day (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2002a).

In January 2001, Lake House's Valampuri/Jaffna- based correspondent, Subramaniam Thiruchelvan, was arrested by the Terrorist Investigation Division under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2001a) for communicating with the LTTE. In the same year Dharmaretnam Sivaram, Editor of the on-line newspaper *Tamilnet*, and *Ravaya* journalist Vasantharaja were denounced in state media as being LTTE spies based on their coverage of the conflict. No formal charges were ever laid (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2001b).

In October 2000, Mayilvaganam Nimalarajan, BBC correspondent and a freelance journalist attached to the Tamil daily *Virakesari* and the Sinhala weekly *Ravaya*, was also arrested for “having links to the LTTE.” Twelve months later, Nimalarajan was murdered allegedly by pro-government Tamil militants of the Eelam People's Democratic Party. Despite a number of suspects being arrested, media watchdog *Reporters Sans Frontières* claims the investigation has been shelved. They claim two of the key suspects released on bail - David Michael Collins and ‘Vishua’ – are a high flight risk and yet have not have their passports impounded (*Reporters Sans Frontières*, 2002b).

## Military restrictions on crossing the ‘border’

Since the mid 1980's the government has controlled the movement of journalists into Tiger-controlled areas. Journalists

have been required to obtain Ministry of Defence (MOD) approval before crossing the border – approval which is frequently denied. As such journalists have been forced to cross the ‘border’ unofficially, risking prosecution and harassment by the Ministry on return.

In April 2001, Marie Colvin, a veteran war correspondent for London’s Sunday Times newspaper was severely wounded by Sri Lankan military gunfire while returning unofficially from the Tiger-held Wannu region (North Central Sri Lanka). The following day, the government issued a statement claiming Colvin had overstayed her visa and appeared to have “her own secret agenda with the LTTE.” Sri Lanka’s overseas missions were subsequently asked to be “cautious when recommending journalists for visas” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001). While Colvin’s charges of colluding with the LTTE were dropped, two local people were charged with organising her border-crossing.

For its part, the LTTE also has a long history of attempting to control and curb the media. Jaffna-based Tamil journalist Shanmugalingam, a reporter for *Eelanadu*, *Eelamurasu*, *Murasoli* and *Viduthalai* was periodically harassed from 1986-1989 by the Tigers for his anti-Tiger stance. In 1986 the LTTE successfully forced the Eelanadu management to sack him. On 6 November 1989, Shanmugalingam was abducted from his home by the LTTE and later believed to have been tortured and killed (Article19, 1992).

Dr Rajani Thiranagama, a Human Rights Activist with the University Teachers for Human Rights, was gunned down by the LTTE on 21 September 1989. Thiranagama the head of human anatomy at the Jaffna University was a co-author of *The Broken Palmyra*, a book which documents human rights violations by the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (Article19, 1992).

Despite denials, the LTTE is also accused of an attack on the Batticaloa based *Thinakkathir Newspaper* on 8 August 2002. The newspaper office was vandalised in the attack and equipment worth 1.2 million Sri Lankan rupees was stolen (Free Media Movement, 2002).

## Mainstream media biases on the Eelam struggle

While the government is regularly criticised by non-government news groups for its efforts to install a pro-government bias in the media, most mainstream media itself (which is predominantly Sinhalese-owned) has adopted a populist, anti-LTTE bias of their own. While this does not necessarily translate to support of the government, an ethnic-based bias against the LTTE, makes it

## The Tigers And Mainstream Media

difficult again for the rebels to receive fair coverage.

Content analyses of mainstream Sri Lankan media has revealed a Sinhala Nationalist bias in both the English and Sinhala media. During a key battle in November 1999, when the military was taking heavy casualties, the Sinhala press published a series of nationalistic and emotive articles along an “our brave boys” line – showing clear support for the Sri Lankan army. Meanwhile the English paper *The Daily News* decided to hold the story on the attack until something positive could be reported, eventually announcing: “Terrorist attack on Ampakamam repulsed”. In another case study, when government troops re-captured a Tiger stronghold *The Daily News* wasted no time in reporting “Vavuniya returns to normal” (Kandaiah, 2001).

Despite widespread media bias against the Eelam struggle, newspapers such as *Yukthiya* and *Ravaya* have attempted to report the conflict from a balanced point of view, and uncharacteristically these Sinhala newspapers employ Tamil journalists for an ethnically balanced coverage. *Yukthiya* and *Ravaya*'s impartial coverage is a solid step in the right direction for Sri Lankan free media, but from the Tiger's point of view, this neutrality limits the papers' usefulness in countering the strong government propaganda and anti-Eelam bias in other traditional media. For the LTTE, balanced coverage in a minority of media is not enough to counter the strong anti-Eelam bias in the majority. The Tigers have recognised that pro-Eelam coverage in traditional media will continue to elude them because of government restrictions, inherent media biases and even journalist's professional quest to be balanced.

In view of this, pro-Eelamists have developed a sophisticated web-based media network which makes no apologies for its overtly pro-Eelam bias. Their technically advanced global network aims to ‘level the playing field’, often offering a direct rebuttal to government and Sinhalese propaganda – but it is not without its faults. As this paper will discuss later, the pro-Eelamists often fail to make the most of their newfound media forum.

## **Eelam struggle and the rebel media**

During the initial stages of the Eelam struggle, rebel media took the form of traditional clandestine media, with pirate radio and television broadcasts. During this early period, the rebel groups fighting for Eelam relied on Indian government patronage, and used radio transmitters in southern India away from the Sri Lankan government's reach.

In 1984 the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) became the first Tamil militant group to launch their



own radio station – a service based at Ramanathapuram on the coast of India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu. The station was operated by Sherly Kandappa, who reported directly to the group’s leader Uma Maheswaran – a Tamil militant and former LTTE member (personal communication with Sivaram, 2001).

The LTTE was also using Indian-based transmission facilities around the same time, but after the Indo-Lanka Accord and more specifically after the LTTE was banned in India following Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, the Tigers were forced to transmit from within Sri Lanka. Their transmissions have been limited to Tiger-held areas and are used mainly to communicate with people within the Eelam territory. Their listeners rely on dynamo-powered radios, as batteries are banned in the region under state embargo.

Despite its relatively limited reach, Voice of Tiger (VOT) radio is constantly targeted by the Sri Lankan airforce. The LTTE’s Nallur radio station was destroyed during Operation Riviresa in the mid 90’s, and a second transmitter was destroyed at Nedunkeni in the Wannu forest a few years later. In 2001 the airforce bombed VOT’s Oddusudan station (Military reports, 2002).

The Tigers also operated a television broadcast in the Jaffna peninsula in 1987 just prior to the IPKF deployment, and again in 1991-1993 after Indian troops were withdrawn. The station located at Kokuvil, Jaffna was destroyed in 1993 by the Sri Lankan Airforce (Military reports, 2002).

## The LTTE’s official media

The Internet has encouraged a shift in who creates, distributes and ultimately owns the news (Knight & Ubayasiri, 2002), and with that shift the Internet has broken or reduced government and the mainstream media monopolies on information. Groups such as Eelam nationalists who have previously struggled with small audiences, easily censored and suppressed media organisations and a predominantly anti-Eelam stance are now able to write and distribute ‘their own news’ through the web.

In two decades since their first communiqué in 1979, the Tiger’s web-based media network has developed into one of the world’s most advanced rebel media units. It is far more advanced than any web-based “counter-campaign that the Colombo Government has, hitherto, been able to organise” (Chalk, 1999).

What started as a communiqué, typed on Tiger letterhead by a supporter using a borrowed typewriter (Swamy, 1994), is now a high-tech multi-media operation encompassing digital technology, cyberspace and satellites.

## Eelam Struggle And Alternative Media

As an example of their development, by the late 1990's the LTTE's European quasi-diplomatic organisation headed by Velummayitum Manoharan, was receiving daily battlefield reports from the forests of Sri Lanka through satellite phone (Chalk, 1999). These reports were then written into official *Tiger* press releases, posted on-line and faxed to media agencies throughout the world. The communiqués were officially released by the Tiger secretariat in London, at 211 Katherine Road, and from Eelam House at 202 Long Lane. However since the LTTE's proscription in the UK (2001), the communiqués are now 'officially' issued from the Tiger's Wannai head office in Sri Lanka, although analysts believe the media office's true location is elsewhere. The Tiger communiqués have been available on the Tiger's official web page *eelam.com* since the mid-90's (Tamil Eelam Homepage, 2002).

Unlike unofficial pro-Eelam sites, the Tiger's official web site *eelam.com* is a relatively basic and unobtrusive homepage. Their online message to the international community is simple. Tiger leader Prabaharan is quoted on the site saying that: "The Tamil people want to maintain their national identity and to live in their own lands, in their historically given homeland with peace and dignity...these are the basic political aspirations of the Tamil people. It is neither separatism nor terrorism."

An analysis of *eelam.com* homepages from 1997 show the Tigers regularly present conflicting messages on-line. While the LTTE on the one hand talks of peace, the site regularly carries a photograph of Tiger leader Velupillai Prabaharan in military fatigues, and remembrances to fallen cadre which include Black Tiger suicide bombers. Since late 2000, the starting point of the current peace negotiations, the site has shifted its focus from LTTE as 'militia' to LTTE as a 'legitimate political organisation', by publishing photographs showing *Tiger* hierarchy rubbing shoulders with the Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim, the Canadian High Commissioner and Amnesty International officials. Even the standard militia image of the Tiger leader was removed in mid-2001, just prior to actual peace talks, and was replaced with one of him dressed in civvies.

### **Unofficial pro-LTTE websites**

The LTTE's unofficial websites are far more sophisticated than their official ones. These sites, which deny being affiliated with the militia, play a crucial role in the Eelam media network, in that they promote the pro-Tamil perspective as 'public information' or news, without the appearance of being strictly LTTE. "Propaganda has a negative connotation and public information has a positive one" (Carlson, 2001), or at least a neutral implication.

For example pro-LTTE websites which attempt to disassociate themselves from the rebel's official organs, can publish articles 'exposing human rights violations' by the Sri Lankan government, and attract a sympathetic audience without their message being marred or undermined by the LTTE's questionable politico-military or violent past.

One such website is *tamiltigers.net*, which focuses on the Sri Lankan government's human rights abuses or "state terrorism". It claims; "Sri Lanka has the second highest number of civilian disappearances in the world," arguing that only Iraq is worse. However the site makes no mention of the Tiger's human rights record, which many argue is equally as poor as the government's, and instead portrays the Tigers as freedom fighters.

Another website *eelamweb.com*, also purports to be committed to exposing the government's human rights violations, but also openly offers a comprehensive e-commerce section, selling the LTTE's monthly video Oliveechu. The videos include footage of all major Tiger attacks on Sri Lankan military and civilian targets, even those attacks, such as the Sri Lankan Airport (2001), which the rebels have not officially taken responsibility for. The site therefore acts as a quasi-LTTE website, collecting funds through the sale of items which, because they prove rebel responsibility for civilian deaths, can not be sold through official sites without undermining the organisation's political agenda.

## **Breaking the government and mainstream media's news monopoly**

The American-based *tamilnet.com* is clearly the forerunner in the Eelamist alternative news campaign – utilising familiar news-style and techniques to present 'news' with an underlying pro-Eelam bias (Tamilnet, 2002b). The site claims to provide "reliable and accurate information on issues concerning the Tamil people". While critics such as veteran *Sunday Times* defence columnist Iqbal Athas have branded the site an LTTE front organization (personal communications with Athas, 2002), the site's producers claim it merely serves the interests of the Tamil people. The site's editor, another veteran defence analyst Dharmaretnam Sivaram, a former journalist of the same newspaper group, makes no apologies for the website's stance, arguing that: "If the views of *tamilnet* are the same as that of the LTTE, let the Sinhalese government be damned" (personal communication with Sivaram, 2002).

Political agenda aside, *tamilnet* provides a solid coverage of the ethnic conflict, regularly including news from the north and east, which is rarely reported in traditional media due to political pressure and inherent biases. The website gathers news through

an extensive contributor network based throughout the island, including the Tiger-held north and east. Sivaram himself reports on major issues, and files his copy and digital images from the field via laptop computer. *Tamilnet* is also the only Sri Lankan news site which posts regular breaking news updates. As such, in terms of both currency and coverage *tamilnet* comfortably surpasses any web-based news-site owned by the Sri Lankan government or the traditional media.

While *tamilnet* occupies the technically sophisticated non-traditional end of Tamil nationalist media, *The Tamil Guardian* utilises the Internet's reach to distribute a more traditional media product – a hardcopy newspaper. Readers are able to subscribe to the hard-copy newspaper via the *Guardian* homepage, or read the latest issue online in pdf format. *The Tamil Guardian*, published once a week on Wednesday, operates out of three offices – one each in the UK, Australia and Canada.

While *The Tamil Guardian* and *tamilnet* have escaped media censorship and government control in Sri Lanka by locating offshore, their Sri Lankan-based contributors are still subject to political pressure. A number of journalists who have openly associated themselves with these news outlets, such as *tamilnet* editor Sivaram, are regularly targeted by opposition groups. It is for this reason that *The Tamil Guardian* and *tamilnet* refrain from printing reporter's bylines. It is a sharp reminder that despite alternative Tamil media's efforts to break free of government control, the continued need to protect reporter's anonymity is an indication they have not yet been fully successful.

## On-line success of pro-Eelam media

Being present on the Internet is not in itself an indication of success as an alternative media outlet. While there is no single way of judging the success of a particular website, there are a number of key indicators which can suggest 'success' in terms of readership and maximisation of the medium.

The first indication is how regularly a site is accessed. This gives an indication of how popular the site is with web surfers, particularly when access or 'hit' rates are compared with other sites of the same nature or of opposing views.

The second indicator is how sites rank on web browser search results using key words pertinent to their subject matter. Sites which rank higher on search results are generally those which have the greatest match to key word searches and are the most likely to be accessed by those surfing for information.

A third indicator, particularly for those sites deigning to be news and public information providers, is how credible a site is

considered by leading news organisations or at the very least how significantly and regularly they are deemed a relevant news resource. This can be ascertained either by a general survey of leading news organisations or more simply by noting if and how often those organisations link or reference the sites in question.

A fourth indicator is how well a group makes use of the Internet medium. The question is whether groups exploit the potential of the medium or whether they simply use it as a glorified newspaper or fax machine and thus fail to attract surfers who are generally looking for more sophisticated website features they cannot get from hardcopy publications. These web-specific features include: on-site searches, easy to access archives, immediacy of news/information coverage, relevant links to other sites - including hyperlinks within articles to background, analysis and on-line discussion and even immediate on-line shopping in relation to web theme.

Other indicators of success include the level of advertising a site attracts, including advertising revenues and the calibre of advertisers, and for sites which are accessed by subscription – subscription numbers. However in terms of the Sri Lankan government, traditional Sri Lankan media and Eelamist sites, these latter indicators are either not applicable (in that they are not subscriber-based or do not rely on advertising to survive) or are used by only a small percentage.

In all other respects – those four indicators applicable to all such sites, Eelamist media sites can be considered very successful, and as this paper will discuss, are considerably more so than their on-line traditional media and Sri Lankan government counterparts.

Each time a website is accessed, the access information is logged on the Common Gateway Interface (CGI) which provides an interface between the web server computer and the Internet. The information stored in the 'cgi/bin' is password protected and can only be accessed by the website owner or by an illegal computer hacker (National Centre for Supercomputing Applications, 1998). While some webmasters prefer to keep their 'hit rates' a secret, other incorporate counter programmes on their pages show the total number of times the page has been accessed. Counters, however, are rare in pro-Eelam web sites.

The prominent Canadian-based pro-Eelam website *tamilcandian.com* does not incorporate a counter on its homepage, but provides a detailed 'hit' record for itself and its news-based companion *News.tamilcandian.com* through a separate link. According to this record, during four weeks in December 2000, the two sites were accessed 2.4 million times, with 12.8 Gigabytes of information downloaded – although these figures cannot be verified

## Readership And Hit Rates

## Keyword And Search Results

independently.

By comparison, in the two years between 2000 and 2002, the Sri Lankan army media page (*army.lk*) was accessed only 230,033 times. On-line Sri Lankan newspapers and other official Sri Lankan sites such as the Department of Information do not have counters on their sites.

But putting *tamilcanadian.com*'s statistics in perspective further, the estimated number of Sri Lankan residents who had Internet connections at the time of the 2.4 million-a-month figures was estimated at just 50,000 - an extremely small percentage of the population but a massive increase on the 14,000 people two years earlier (*news.com*, 1998).

Most search engines use a program called a 'spider' which 'crawls' through the web cataloguing and ranking web sites. While the exact algorithm of each search engine spider is kept secret, most use a location-frequency algorithm to rank sites. In this manner sites are graded according to the location and frequency of a specific key word used. Therefore in most cases the sites that are most relevant to a particular key word are listed at the top of a search for that word.

As such the relative positioning of a web site on a search engine can be used as a measure of that page's success, since the listing shows that the pages at the top are considered more relevant by the search engine algorithms and have a higher chance of being read by any one who performs a search for that particular key word.

A search on three of the most frequently used search engines - *google.com*, *yahoo.com* and *msn.com* (Nielsen-Netratings, 2002), suggest pro-Eelam web-sites are relatively successful in ranking within the first few search results, but their success is marred by a number of missed opportunities.

Because most pro-Eelam sites focus on the conceptual state of 'Eelam' and generally do not refer to the civil war in 'Sri Lanka'. In doing so, they miss an opportunity to rank at the top of Internet searches for the words 'Sri Lanka' - which are arguably the commonest key words for any web search on the conflict.

In 2,840,000 google search results and 2,670,000 yahoo search results for the words 'Sri Lanka', pro-Eelam sites ranked extremely poorly, with Sri Lankan newspapers, the official Department of Information homepage and the Sri Lankan Army page ranking considerably higher - primarily because the words 'Sri Lanka' are inseparable from those web page's theme and subject matter. The first position of both searches was taken by Sri Lanka Web Server which provides links to on-line versions of five mainstream

national newspapers – *The Sunday Leader*, *The Island*, *Divaina* and the government-owned *Sunday Observer* and *Daily News*. The second listing was the Sri Lankan government site maintained by the Presidential Secretariat's Policy Research and Information Unit. While the Tiger's official site failed to enter the top 100 in both *Google* and *Yahoo*, it ranked 25th in *msn.com*, but again the government-owned *Daily News* came well ahead in fifth.

However the results changed dramatically when the key words were changed to 'Tamil Tigers', with *eelam.com* and *eelamweb.com* securing the top two positions – again because of the very nature of their sites. One anti-Tiger site, the Australian-based Society for Peace, Unity & Human Rights in Sri Lanka (SPUR) ranked well coming fifth. A key word search of 'Tamil Tiger' also proved overwhelmingly favoured pro-Eelam sites, but a page titled 'Eliminate Tamil Terrorism from Sri Lanka and the Rest of the World' - a mirror site of the anti-LTTE *sinhaya.com* – managed to make it to the top of 49,200 entries in *Yahoo* and 45,900 in *Google*.

Despite Sri Lankan Tamils constituting less than 10% of the world Tamil population, the word 'Tamil' also strongly favoured the Eelamists. *Tamilnet* came second and *eelam.com* third, closely followed by *tamilguardian.com* in sixth place out of 1,560,00 *Google* search results and 1,690,000 *Yahoo* results. The results were similar but less favourable for pro-Eelam sites on *msn.com*.

In a more specific word search, the key word 'Eelam', perhaps unsurprisingly delivered overwhelming success for LTTE and pro-Eelam propaganda sites - both ranking well at the top of 88,900 search results on *Google* and 87,500 on *Yahoo*. In both cases pro-Eelam news sites such as *tamilnet.com* and *tamilguardian.com* ranked significantly lower than propaganda sites such as *eelam.com* the tigers official site and *eelamweb.com*. Mainstream and government media failed to appear in the top 50 sites in both searches. Interestingly in a search using the words 'Sri Lanka Army' – *tamilnet.com* ranks third in the results.

## **Eelam sites and the international press**

The British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) on-line world edition regularly provides a links to *tamilnet.com* and to the Sri Lankan government's *priu.gov.lk*, and on some occasions to both *eelam.com* and *eelamweb.com*. In linking to these pages the BBC, which is one of the most frequently accessed news web sites, provides yet another opportunity for pro-Eelam sites to be viewed by readers of the mainstream international press.

Similarly CNN.com and Associated Press also regularly provide links to *tamilnet.com* and *eelam.com* as part of their coverage of the Sri Lankan conflict. Other sites which do not provide links, such as

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Agence France-Presse, Xinhua and Inter Press Service, still commonly make reference to *tamilnet.com* as the key pro-rebel media organisation – pitting it directly against the Sri Lankan government media machine.

While none of these international media services make a judgement on the credibility of the linked pro-Eelam sites – the fact they consider them an appropriate and relevant alternative to government news resources in relation to the Sri Lankan conflict, is an indication those sites are successfully attracting reputable news organisations to their pages and thus finding a broader forum for their views.

In terms of mastery of Internet technology, web design and the exploitation of the Internet medium, pro-Eelam news groups such as *tamilnet* and *eelamweb.com* easily outstrip the on-line news produced by the both the Sri Lankan government and the country's traditional press.

While traditional newspapers such as the *Daily News* and *The Sunday Observer* up-load selected news stories once a day and use the web-pages to mirror hardcopy newspapers, *tamilnet.com* has moved a step further, functioning almost as a wire service updating its site as news breaks. Non-Eelamist Sri Lankan sites have failed to maximise this feature of the Internet, so by recognising the possibilities the Internet offers in terms of immediacy, *tamilnet.com* producers are exploiting the medium far more effectively than their government or traditional media counterparts.

*Tamilnet.com* also exploits the interactive, data storage and retrieval capacity of the Internet in providing a detailed news archive from 07 June 1997 onwards. It also offers a key word search function within its archive – a function seriously lacking in mainstream media sites. The *tamilnet* archive is arranged according to the chronological order of the articles, allowing readers to browse through article headlines of a given month and open only the relevant pages. In contrast the government owned *Daily News* and *The Sunday Observer's* archives are akin to bundles of newspaper stacked in chronological order, meaning readers have to move from month to month forwards or backwards in a liner scale in a bid to find a particular story – the headlines of which are not even listed.

Another key area where Eelamist sites have successfully employed the Internet medium well beyond the efforts of their non-Eelamist counterparts, is in the inclusion of audio and/or visual elements on their pages. Perhaps the most striking example is *tamiltigers.net*, an unofficial LTTE site which offers readers a selection of CNN news clips. The clips showing Tiger related news,



attacks in Sri Lanka and battlefield footage add another dimension to the site. Similarly the unofficial site eelamweb.com makes good use of the Internet's audio facilities, offering sound grabs from many of Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's key speeches. By contrast President Chandrika Kumaratunga's own web page (presidentsl.org) manages only text versions of her key speeches and photo stills. The same can be said for the Department of Information. On-line newspapers too have failed to expand beyond the traditional static format – utilising the web merely as another way to read their standard hard copy product. The only major non-Eelamist site which uses audio is that of the Sri Lankan army which features audio links to army songs and sound bites from the army commander. However these links are currently unavailable.

Aside from its functions as an education or information tool, the Internet also has a social element which offers surfers an opportunity to browse, shop, chat and participate in on-line activities. Being able to tap into the social aspect is also an indication of effective use of the Internet – and again is one in which the Eelamist sites as a whole surpass their 'rivals'. *Eelamweb.com* is perhaps the forerunner in this area, offering on-line shopping and an on-line quiz centering around the Eelam theme. For sale are the LTTE's Oliveechu videos, Eelam flags, English and Tamil books on the conflict and music CD's. While *eelamweb.com* does not have a chat room or the like, a message board is present on the *tamilcanadian.com*. Comparatively none of the key government or mainstream media sites have either discussion, shopping or activities.

For terrorist, separatist, rebel and minority groups which have struggled for years to find sympathetic forums for their political views, the advent of the Internet was a gift. It heralded the arrival of what is effectively an uncensorable, uncontrollable information outlet with a global reach accessible by virtually anyone, anywhere with a home computer and a phone line.

In the case of the LTTE and pro-Eelamist groups, the Internet offered an opportunity to make up some of the ground lost in the Sri Lanka to the government propaganda machine and the anti-Eelam mainstream media. Within months of the Internet revolution in the mid-90's, the Tigers and their supporters were online – using new websites to deliver their separatist message to the world and to unite their scattered diaspora.

The Sri Lankan government eventually followed suit, as did the mainstream media, but even today, with perhaps the exception of *The Sunday Times*, pro-Eelam sites are more sophisticated, more user friendly and attract a wider audience.

## Conclusion

But while the Eelamists web-based media network easily surpasses its anti-Eelamist rivals at a global level, it does have its flaws – perhaps most strikingly the fact that it largely ‘preaches to the converted’. For all their efforts, pro-Eelam sites do not have a Sinhala language service.

Unlike the LTTE’s *Voice of Tiger* radio which transmits a Sinhala news bulletin targeted at government troops, the Eelamists on-line have failed to target the Sinhala speaking web users. Considering the aspects of psychological warfare associated with this type of conflict, the lack of a pro-Eelam website in Sinhala is truly a lost opportunity.

Similarly, while pro-Eelam sites are prolific on the web they seem to target those who are already relatively familiar with the civil war and run the risk of failing to reach international readers who are merely aware of the conflict but not its many nuances. In this respect the pro-Eelam groups’ use of the web is similar to many political and activist groups which use the web largely to reach and unite their supporters. Their failure to rank high in a browser search for the more used words; ‘Sri Lanka’ and their dominance of the top results in a search for the culturally specific term ‘Eelam’ is testament that they may not be capturing as wide an audience as they could with simply a few tweaks of wording.

While Eelamist sites as a whole have clearly proven they have grasped the potential and the technology of the Internet through their effective use of the breaking news updates and effective interactive searches, there are many sites which suffer from a lack of vision. Audio-visual elements, on-line activities and interactive discussion successfully used by some sites, could be more widely used by others with greater effectiveness. The same of course, could be said of the Sri Lankan government and mainstream media.

Credibility also remains a key barrier for the success of emerging news websites, particularly when the credibility of traditional media services such as newspaper and radio remains undiminished. What bolsters Eelamist sites’ reputation as a credible alternative news source, however, is the increasing number of well-established news groups recognising their news worth.

While the Internet offers a ‘level playing field’ where banned groups such as the LTTE, pro-Eelam sites, official Sri Lankan Government sites and even anti-conflict sites such as the University Teachers for Human Rights (*uthr.org*) are able to coexist on-line without persecution and censorship, it would be misguided to believe that those who contribute to those sites are equally free.

Despite the Government’s Chief Censor, Ariya Rubasinghe’s threats to crack down on web-based media (International Press Institute, 2000), on-line news-sites based outside Sri Lanka remain out of the government’s reach. The challenge now for those pro-

Eelam news-sites is how to similarly put their Sri Lankan-based reporters out of government reach while still maintaining their commitment to promoting the Eelam cause. As seen with *tamilnet* editor Sivaram, journalists working for on-line alternative media still remain targets of government and anti-Eelam groups in Sri Lanka.

For as long as persecution and bias continues in Sri Lanka's traditional media sphere, minority groups such as pro-Eelamists will always seek less prohibitive outlets for their views. The use of the Internet as such a forum has been a wise move, but has failed to impact the restrictive media system they were escaping from. The key aspect pro-Eelamists need to recognise now, is that by turning to the Internet to promote their heavily biased propaganda, they may well have given themselves a forum they were previously denied, but have also perpetuated unbalanced poorly-veiled publishing of propaganda. Their criticism of a lack of balance in a predominantly Sinhala-owned Sri Lankan mainstream media can now be equally applied to the Tamil media on the net. ■

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