

CHALLENGES FACED BY PROVINCIAL TELEVISION JOURNALISTS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Provincial journalists play a vital role in gathering news from a specific geographical area and sending it to a main newsroom in a particular media station. Moreover, the provincial journalists have to face several challenges in their profession in gathering, sending and publishing news. Therefore, the study is carried out to investigate the challenges faced by the provincial journalists in Sri Lanka in terms of television news using the Motivational System Theory (MST). The interviews were conducted with twenty provincial journalists covering almost all the districts in Sri Lanka. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed. The results showed the personal and institutional factors affecting the news coverage of provincial journalists. In other words, the provincial journalists faced challenges due to several personal and institutional factors. Moreover, at the institutional level, the provincial journalists faced several challenges such as delayed and inadequate payments, working for several media stations simultaneously without having proper payments, low professional recognition, inadequate welfare schemes, training, resources and awareness given by the media stations, no proper recruitment procedure, political influence, newsroom agenda, violating ethical journalism standards, male dominate news coverage and less female representation etc. On the other hand, personal factors such as less qualifications, education, training, resources, motivation and skills are also negatively affecting provincial journalism. Therefore, it is important to establish a proper work culture to uplift the profession of the provincial journalists. Moreover, the responsible parties should provide the required resources, facilities, payments, opportunities, guidance, training, and awareness, proper recruitment procedure to create a professional and encouraging work environment for provincial journalists in Sri Lanka. It is also essential to maintain gender equality and ethical standards to establish a healthy and positive work environment for provincial journalists.

Keywords: provincial journalists, TV news, personal and institutional challenges, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Schramm (1964) states that mass media can act as a middleman, a watchdog, a change agent etc. in empowering communities. Therefore, the media can play a significant role in providing education, entertainment, motivation and information. In other words, journalists should play a vital role in providing education, entertainment, motivation and information to the general public. Therefore, the role of journalists is significant to maintain the journalistic values, professionalism and ethical concerns connected to media such as print, electronic and new media.

When it comes to television, it is more popular among ordinary and rural communities in developing countries as an electronic media. Trenholm (2011) notes that television was the most popular medium before introducing the internet to the world. Newspapers took 200 years, while magazines took about 170 years, sound took about 60 years, movies took about 50 years, radio took more than 40 years and television about 30 years to become popular in the world. But still television is more popular in rural settings than modern communication media like the Internet.

The structure of a media organization consists of several media professionals. As far as the newsroom in a television station is concerned, the director or head of the division, news anchors, camera operators, reporters, provincial journalists, photojournalists, broadcast technicians, news producers, news editors, social media managers, general managers, engineers etc. have to play a vital role in creating, editing, delivering and sharing news (Trenholm, 2011).

This shows that the news telecast is a collective effort made by all the journalists or media persons who work in the newsroom. In addition to the internal media persons in the newsroom, the provincial

journalists also play a vital role in providing news to the newsroom. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) Sri Lanka has also emphasized that the provincial journalists have to play a larger role in reporting and sending news to newsrooms of the media institutions. Therefore, it is important to empower provincial journalists with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively navigate the challenges related to hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, mal information, media ethics, human rights and legal regulations governing their profession. Moreover, the provincial journalists face several other issues in their profession.

In this context, it is important to identify the challenges faced by the provincial journalists. Therefore, the problem of the study is lacking of knowledge about the challenges faced by the provincial journalists in television news journalism. The literature also shows that no research has been conducted to find out the challenges faced by the provincial journalists. The purpose of the study is to investigate the challenges faced by the provincial journalists in television news journalism. The specific objective is to identify the personal and institutional factors affecting the TV news journalism done by the provincial journalists.

Literature Review

News journalism is the process of gathering, preparing and sharing news and related commentary through various media. “Journalism is a phenomenon that can be seen in many ways-as a sixth sense, a container, a mirror, a story, a child, a service, a profession, an institution, a text, people, a set of practices. These ways of thinking about journalism suggest various routes through which we might approach journalism, the press, and the news media. They are useful here because each offers a way to think about how the press could work better than it does today” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 76). Zelizer further explains that news is the report of recent events, or occurrences brought or coming to one as new information, new occurrences as a subject of report or talk.

By considering the definitions given by different scholars, it is understood that news journalism is the collection, preparation, and distribution of news and related commentary and feature materials through print, electronic and new media. Television journalism also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and providing crucial information for decades. Television journalism involves more than reporting the news on television. TV journalists research and present the news on TV. As far as a newsroom in a television station is concerned, the head of the division, news anchors, camera operators, reporters, provincial journalists, photojournalists, broadcast technicians, news producers, news editors, social media managers, general managers, engineers etc. have to play a vital role in creating, editing, delivering and sharing news (Trenholm, 2011).

The literature shows that the news telecast is a collective effort made by all the journalists or media persons who work in the newsroom. In addition to the internal media persons in the newsroom, the provincial journalists also play a vital role in providing news to the newsroom. Shafer (2016) notes that, the provincial journalists in the Philippines face several issues due to economic hardship, temptation from bribery and physical danger. But a few research have been conducted on provincial journalists at the international level.

On the other hand, some local reports have discussed the challenges faced by the provincial journalists. According to the 21st Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-2023 and Media freedom in Sri Lanka: Annual Report 2021 published by the Free Media Movement; the provincial journalists face several challenges in their profession. But both reports emphasize that provincial journalists play a challenging role in collecting and sharing news at the provincial level. “Provincial journalists who usually work for several media institutions are especially vulnerable to low pay and job insecurity” (21st Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-2023, 2023, p. 2). “There are provincial journalists who work according to the Code of Ethics. But most look only for the news value. They just write and send what they have written to the main office. Provincial journalists and editorial staff should develop credibility of news. Likewise, the provincial journalists face challenges due to personal and institutional factors” (Media Monitor, 2006). But neither of these reports have discussed the challenges faced by the provincial journalists analytically and deeply. These reports have only given a brief explanation about the provincial journalists while discussing the common factors related to

media and journalism in general. The literature also shows that no scientific research has been done on this particular area in the local context.

Therefore, there is a gap in doing research considering the major challenges faced by the provincial journalists due to personal and institutional factors. In this context, this research has been done to fill this gap by investigating the challenges faced by provincial journalists in TV news journalism using the Motivational System Theory (MST). In other words, it is expected to investigate the challenges faced by the provincial journalists by considering the key components of MST like personal factors such as motivation, skills, biological factors and institutional factors such as responsive environment. “MST theory explains that achievement and competence are the results of a motivated, skillful, and biologically capable person interacting with a responsive environment” (Ford, 1992, p. 70). A formula is given to explain the MST theory as follows.

$$\text{Achievement/Goal} = (\text{Motivation} \times \text{Skill}) \times \text{Responsive Environment Biological}$$

Therefore, this study expects to investigate the challenges faced by provincial journalists connected with personal factors such as skills, motivation, biological reasons and institutional factors such as working culture, supportive environment, practices and resources, etc. The following figure explains the conceptual framework of this study based on the MST theory.

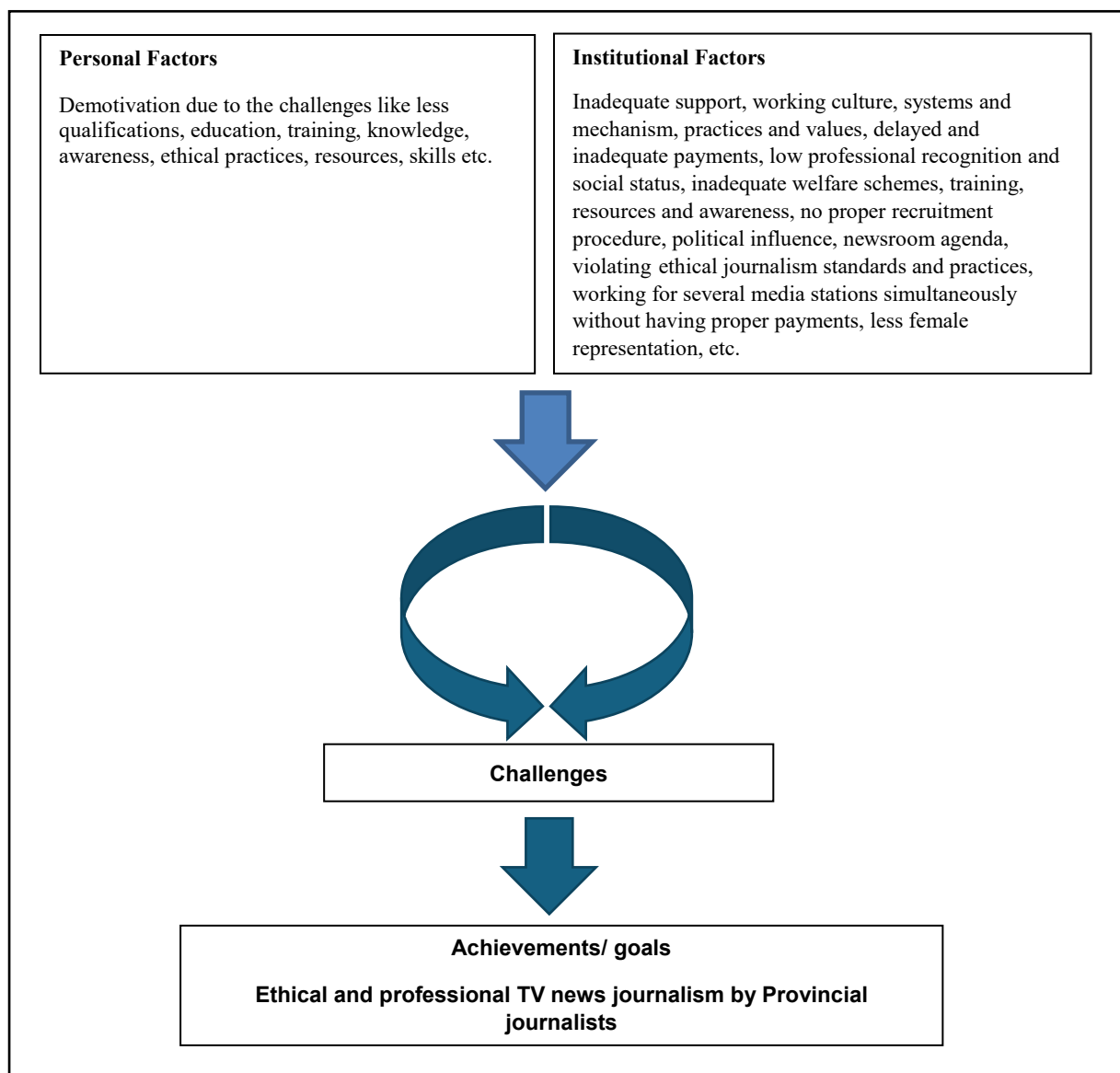


Figure 1: The challenges faced by the provincial journalists at the personal and institutional levels

The figure shows that the personal and institutional factors have an impact on TV news journalism done by the provincial journalists. In other words, the challenges faced by the provincial journalists in TV news journalism at the institutional and personal levels are shown in the figure. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to investigate the challenges faced by the provincial Journalists in TV news journalism and the specific objective is to identify the personal and institutional factors affecting the TV news journalism done by the provincial journalists.

Methodology

The qualitative approach was adopted to collect data using the interview method. Gill et al. (2008) note that interviews provide a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon. In other words, detailed insights of a particular subject or an area can be collected from individual participants using the interview method.

Therefore, personal interviews were conducted with twenty provincial journalists since currently there are only limited provincial journalists who cover TV news compared to the last few years. One journalist usually works for several TV stations. This is due to journalists heavily leaving this field due to several reasons (21st Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report: Sri Lanka Country Report 2022-2023, 2023). For the research, one provincial journalist from each district was selected except for the provincial journalists from Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Mullaitivu, Manner and Kilinochchi due to the Tamil language barrier. Sinhala medium journalists were selected as they face several issues in news coverage compared to the English medium journalists according to the 21st Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report: Sri Lanka Country Report in 2023. Purposive sampling was used to select the journalists. In order to gain detailed insights of the provincial journalism, samples were selected consisting of male and female journalists in different age groups in all the provinces. The personal interviews were conducted with each journalist individually. On the other hand, personal interviews were conducted with the director or the head or a senior journalist in the newsrooms of the main state owned and private owned TV channels such as SLRC, ITN, Derana, Hiru, Charana, Siyatha and Suwarnavahini to identify the challenges faced by the provincial journalists.

The data collection was done with the support of five research assistants in the month of September 2024. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Some limitations were caused in the study due to some geographical and subjective reasons. The twenty respondents were only selected due to time and financial reasons. Subjectively, this study mainly focuses on TV news reporting. But the population, sample size and subject area can be expanded to find more practical findings in a future study in a systematic and methodical manner.

Discussion

As far as the demographic details of the provincial journalists are concerned, the findings showed that there were only three females among twenty journalists. “Low participation of women in the labor force is a general trend in Sri Lanka, with the national female labor force participation rate reported at 32 percent, despite high levels of female education. The percentage of female journalists in Sri Lanka is limited compared to the male journalists due to sexual harassment and favoritisms, digital literacy, lack of security for night shifts, lack of access to professional training and avenues for skill development, stereotyped attitudes, male dominant news coverage and lack of motivation and support from family. When it comes to provincial journalists, only 3 percent are female. The number of women who use social media is also low compared to men. This may be because they face more online harassment (21st Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-2023, 2023, p. 2).”

The findings of the study also showed that female representation of provincial journalism is also limited due to several reasons such as favoritisms, digital literacy, lack of security for night shifts, lack of access to professional training and avenues for skill development, stereotyped attitudes, male dominate news coverage and lack of motivation and support from family etc. “A 51-year-old female journalist emphasized that ‘Always the male journalists dominate the provincial journalism, and female journalists are always discriminated at the family and institutional levels since there is no adequate support from the family to engage in news coverage. On the other hand, TV channels or other male

journalists do not create any encouraging environment for females to perform well in their profession. Without having proper payments, necessary skills, encouraging surroundings etc. it is difficult for female journalists to be in this profession.”

This shows that provincial journalists face several challenges due to delayed and inadequate payments, low professional recognition etc. in addition to gender-based discrimination. “Provincial journalists who usually work for several media institutions are especially vulnerable to low pay and job insecurity. They were not allowed to join a trade union, as their institutions had banned it, despite such membership being a fundamental right guaranteed by the Sri Lanka constitution. But the Department of Government Information, under the Ministry of Mass Media, issues the identity cards to provincial journalists as well” (Media Freedom in Sri Lanka: Annual Report, 2021, p. 4).

The findings of the study also proved that provincial journalists are working for several TV stations simultaneously for delayed and inadequate payments. Low professional recognition is another challenge faced by the provincial journalists. Furthermore, inadequate welfare schemes, training, resources and awareness, no proper recruitment procedure, newsroom agenda, political influence etc. are directly connected to their profession. A 60-year-old journalist said that “I had been working as a provincial journalist for more than 20 years. But unfortunately, no media institution has given proper training to the provincial journalists. I participated in some training and awareness programs done by some projects. At least I had not been paid for more than eight months by one TV station. We as provincial journalists do not have any welfare schemes, resources etc. though the Media Ministry issues us an ID card. The politicians always try to misuse provincial journalists for their own benefits. Now I engage in news coverage while doing another job”.

According to the findings of the study, more than 65 percent of provincial journalists engaged in TV news coverage while doing another job. The findings also further showed that journalists have to buy equipment like cameras, smart mobile phones etc. Moreover, the media stations do not provide resources, welfare schemes, ETFs, insurance, training and awareness to the journalists. Proper procedures are also not followed to recruit provincial journalists to media institutions. As a result, unqualified, untrained and unskilled journalists are recruited for news coverage. Provincial journalists only receive contract letters from the media organizations. It is mentioned in the letter that journalists must take responsibility for unethical or irresponsible reporting. According to the findings of the study, newly recruited journalists are higher than well experienced and professional journalists. The major challenge is that the well-recognized, trained and qualified provincial journalists are currently leaving this profession and engage in some other professions due to the above- discussed challenges.

As explained by the MST theory, the institutional factors such as discouraging environment, delayed and inadequate payments, low professional recognition, gender-based discrimination, inadequate welfare schemes, training, resources and awareness, no proper recruitment procedure, political influence, newsroom agenda etc. negatively affect the provincial journalism. On the other hand, the findings showed that personal factors such as less qualifications, education, training, resources, motivation, awareness and skills also are also negatively affecting provincial journalism as discussed below. The findings further showed that irrespective of the province or district, all the provincial journalists faced common challenges in their profession.

A considerable number of journalists are not well aware of media ethics according to the findings of the study. Because unqualified, untrained and unskilled journalists engage in unethical and irresponsible reporting. The findings of the study also showed that 65 percent of journalists do not have proper educational or professional qualifications and training to engage in news coverage. Furthermore, some journalists do not have adequate technical knowledge of using social media or equipment. Media freedom in Sri Lanka: Annual Report (2021) also shows that provincial journalists are not adequately aware of new technologies and use minimum facilities for news coverage. So, the quality of news coverage is not maintained due to limited digital literacy, skills and ethical considerations.

A senior journalist in a newsroom stated that “Provincial journalists mostly violate media ethics in news reporting. For instance, a provincial journalist recently sent a video which contains personal details of the victims. This violates the privacy of victims. In addition to the issues connected to privacy, disinformation, misinformation, mal-information, hate speeches etc. are practiced by provincial journalists. As a responsible TV channel, we usually adhere to ethics and do not telecast any news which violate journalism ethics. Several provincial journalists started supporting politicians in the area for their promotions due to financial benefits. Therefore, some videos sent to the newsroom are full of

propaganda of politicians”. But the findings showed that some provincial journalists are threatened by politicians due to factual, accurate and balanced news reporting. The findings further showed that some provincial journalists also violate journalism ethics in covering TV news. Moreover, privacy of children, women and marginalized communities including sensitive pictures, videos and information is unnecessarily exposed in news coverage. Disinformation, mal-information, misinformation and hate speeches are also included in the news content by some of the provincial journalists.

On the other hand, provincial journalists complained that media institutions always force the journalists to send trending videos and news to get more ratings. The findings showed that these kinds of videos are shared due to the influence and force given by the newsroom. Provincial journalists further showed that news are manipulated and designed according to the agenda of each TV station. Information Disorder and Mainstream Media in Sri Lanka: A Case Study done by the Media Team of Verité Research in 2021 also emphasized that several TV news contain unethical content which violates journalism ethics while the report on Assessment of the broadcast ratings system in Sri Lanka in 2017 published by the Government Information Department highlighted that compared to other media, television medium always creates and publishes its content to get more ratings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the institutional factors such as discouraging environment, delayed and inadequate payments, low professional recognition, gender-based discrimination, inadequate welfare schemes, training, resources and awareness, no proper recruitment procedure, political influence, newsroom agenda etc. and the personal factors such as less qualifications, education, training, resources, motivation, awareness and skills also are also negatively affecting provincial journalism.

Therefore, it is important to establish a proper work culture to uplift the profession of the provincial journalists. Moreover, the responsible parties such as the Media Ministry, media institutions, trade unions etc. should provide the required resources, adequate welfare schemes, facilities, opportunities, guidance, training and awareness to create a professional and encouraging work environment for provincial journalists in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it is essential to establish a proper recruitment procedure for provincial journalists by considering the qualifications, training etc. There should be a proper mechanism to maintain gender equality in provincial journalism.

The responsible authorities should also make sure that the freedom of expression and the right to information of provincial journalists are safeguarded in a democratic manner in terms of news coverage, trade unionism etc. The existing code of ethics for print media journalists should be updated in accordance with the current trends and changes in the media. In addition to that, introducing the code of ethics for electronic media and new media including social media is essential to establish ethical and professional standards of journalism. Therefore, the media institutions should provide proper training and awareness on media ethics, advanced technology, investigative reporting and so on to the provincial journalists.

In order to create an appreciative and encouraging environment, some awards can be given to the provincial journalists in media award ceremonies at the national level. These awards and appreciations can be done for the best ethical reporting, investigative reporting etc. It is also important to empower provincial journalists financially. Therefore, a reasonable payment scheme should be introduced for provincial journalists while providing financial support to buy technical equipment such as cameras, production tools, editing tools, apps etc. by the media institutions. The responsible authorities such as the Media Ministry should introduce a national media policy to develop a country where media literacy, code of ethics, freedom of expression, right to information etc. are safeguarded. Furthermore, the national media policy should also give priority to improving provincial journalism.

On the other hand, provincial journalists are responsible for obtaining educational and professional qualifications, experiences, training and for improving necessary skills in provincial journalism without violating media ethics. It is also important to contribute to establishing ethical, fair, balanced, credible and accurate media culture for the betterment of the country.

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