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Abstract:

In Sri Lanka, formal Mass Communication education was incepted in 1973 at the University of Kelaniya. Before that, mass communication courses were offered by other educational institutions such as polytechnic colleges. Subsequently, other universities and private education institutes too provided media and mass communication related programs.

More than three decades after the advent of mass communication education in Sri Lanka, some trying issues still remain unaddressed. This paper examines how contemporary Sri Lankan mass media/ mass communication education should address the challenges and meet the demands, both national and global.

Introduction:

Communication is an essential factor for the maintenance of social equilibrium striking a balance between competing social factors and facilitating a healthy nexus between them and the masses.

Mass communication was introduced as a mainstream subject to the university system in Sri Lanka in early 1970's. But some evidence show that even before the Grunewald Declaration¹, courses related to communication and media education had existed in Sri Lanka. In 1969, media courses were started in junior universities that were considered technical education centers in Sri Lanka. However, these courses did not bring about the expected outcome. Thus, the University of Kelaniya in 1973 integrated this subject into the curricula of most of the other higher education institutions in Sri Lanka (Dissanayake,2018). Teaching of mass communication in universities was initially carried out by lecturers based

¹ Grunewald Declaration: Grunewald declaration was issued unanimously by the representatives of 19 nations at UNESCO's 1982 International Symposium on Media Education at Grunewald, Federal Republic of Germany.

on resources available in the Sinhala medium.

Since then, education programs with various designations, such as. mass media, mass communication, journalism, communication and writer-ship have been introduced by universities, governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental/private institutes. They offered a wide range of academic courses such as certificate, diploma, undergraduate, postgraduate diploma, and post graduate degree courses.

As an initiative to introduction of media education to school curricula, the same was listed among extra subjects prescribed for Grade 10 and 11². However, school level teaching of communication actually commenced in 2007 with the introduction of communication and media education to Grade 10 (Dissanayake,2018).

Formal and informal approaches in media education are being adopted in Sri Lanka in unique ways. As many other academic disciplines, Media education has been confronted with challenges and issues. This paper aims at examining the present plights of mass communication and mass media education in Sri Lanka.

Discussion:

Media education basically pivots around identifying, analyzing, evaluating and creating media texts. It reflects media literacy within a mediated environment. Hence, in contrast to more popular and sought after disciplines, it is inevitably confronted with many obstacles due to scarcity of literary, technical and human resources.

One of the problem of Mass Communication education in Sri Lanka, is inadequacy of personnel who have studied the subjects of mass media and communication to the extent of being able to teach these subjects (Dissanayake,2018). This is a common scenario in schools. Although a semblance of proportion of teachers possess four year Honor's Degree in Mass Communication or Mass Media with a class, while all others have degrees with no direct relevance to the subject. Nevertheless, those who possess media related degrees with a passion to teach can hardly obtain government teaching appointments due to political and bureaucratic influences.

Bandula P. Dayarathne, [Former Chief Project Officer] National Institute of Education

² Ministry of Education Circular 99/45 of 2006

(NIE), who is a pioneer in introducing media and communication to school curriculum describes this present context in Sri Lanka:

School communication and media education began in 2006 at ordinary and advanced level. It was very different from traditional university mass communication education. It was aimed to study broad learning events(concepts) in communication and media studies. It was not aimed at teaching mass media or mass communication. Moreover, Sri Lankan media industry is not huge or expanding. There is no real system to recruit media scholars as journalists. Therefore, many of the Mass Media or Mass Communication graduates are appointed as School Teachers, Office Management Assistants and other similar jobs. Many of Mass Media or Mass Communication graduates teach at primary classes. This environment of Communication and Media Education in Sri Lanka is a tragedy. We should discover a new way to re-organize this bad situation and develop a new vision³

Finding employment on completion of university education is an arduous task in Sri Lanka. According to an eminent Sri Lankan scholar and former Dean of the faculty of Humanities of University of Kelaniya, Professor Chandrasiri Palliyaguru⁴, most of the employees who are attached to mass media has not proper qualification on mass communication, media or related fields whereas thousands of qualified personnel with Mass Media/ Mass Communication/ Journalism certificate, diploma, degree or postgraduate qualifications remain redundant.

Asoka Dias⁵, Country representative of Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) and employer of Sirasa TV noted that Media and entertainment industry moves forward rapidly with the advancement of technology. Mass Media and Mass Communication department and faculties of Sri Lankan state universities do

³ Interview with author, 12th of Sept 2019

⁴ Telephone interview with author, 19th of August, 2019

⁵ Telephone interview with author, 19th of October, 2019

not pay adequate attention to identify such trends and change the syllabi to offer the required skills to the undergraduates. That creates a challenge to the graduate in finding employment in the highly competitive media and entertainment industry.

Some issues have cropped up in formulating syllabi and teacher's guides in relation to teaching communication and mass media in schools (Dissanayake,2018). The syllabus for G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination in communication and media studies was suspended in 2017 after being amended several times. The school syllabi has been revised many times notwithstanding overwhelming criticism of university academics, educators, school teachers, stake holders and interested parties. Apparently the syllabi are still in the process of trial and error. Teachers' guide for the above syllabus was also full of errors, so quite a few pages can be quoted. In page 89 under the glossary, the Sinhala word *Jana Sangskruthiya* has been interpreted as folk culture. But in page 82 it said: 'Mass Culture was the glossary usage first used for the term *Jana Sangskruthiya*' (*Ravaya Newspaper*, 2018, October 7, p.15). The most suitable Sinhala word for the English word mass is *Sanghathika*. The Sinhala word suited for folk is *Jana*. The word '*Sanghathika*' refers to a new mode of social formation (Dissanayake, 2018). As further aforementioned issues founding the formulation of school syllabi and teachers' guides affect the quality of contents of texts.

Another monumental challenge confronted by media education in the island is the severe dearth of adequate technical equipment in classroom and lecture halls of universities and other such institutions. This disturbing trend can be ameliorated, even to a minuscule extend, by sending undergraduates, graduates and others who have acquired media related qualifications (in third and/or final years of mass communication program) to television channels, newspaper publishers and media institutions for internships and/or practical training. Nevertheless, finding such channel, newspaper publisher or media institution could be an arduous task for students hail from far-fetched areas from the capital Colombo such as the students of the University of Jaffna (Raguram,2015), Vavuniya Campus and University of Ruhuna.

Another insidious setback plaguing media education in Sri Lanka is the language barrier since most of the degree programs are conducted in mainstream Sinhala and Tamil medium while very few degree programs offer English language as the medium. This could

be seen as a major obstacle thwarting the students from expanding the horizons of their knowledge on a global scale by keeping tabs with the contemporary media related developments while maintaining a healthy rapport with international media organizations.

The lack of textbooks and other printed material on media is an omnipresent dismal scenario resulted by insufficient allocation of annual funds. Most of the reputed printed material of international publishers are costly further aggravating this plight.

Perspective with which the educationalists, policy makers and academics (*the writer means no offence on the academia*) perceive media education is dismally pathetic. Inability and/or obtuseness in comprehending the underlying principles in the discipline of mass media and communication has already taken its toll on media education and media culture prevailing in the island manifesting terminal symptoms.

Sri Lanka has never been known as a place where significant texts in media studies in any language have been produced. As such, the over-dependence on Sinhala language materials, many of which are of dubious quality, would mean the limiting of the intellectual horizons of students. Formal education in media-related studies in the country reflects the serious dismantling of the social sciences that is quite evident in the higher education sector. The fact that these study programs were introduced after the downward spiral of Sri Lankan higher education in general, and social sciences and humanities education in particular, had already begun, did not help its establishment or its later development and expansion. It was based on a simplistic set of assumptions that were strictly utilitarian and simplistically technical in nature and had no linkages with a serious process of teaching-learning, based on a clear research agenda or a robust understanding of social theory, history or politics⁶.

“There could also be certain fundamental differences in the way that universities and the industry think of the approach to the subject. For example, sometimes one get the feeling

⁶ Source - <http://mediareformlanka.com>

that the primary motivation within the universities is with the impact of media on society rather than the objective of training journalists for the industry. In other words the fundamental motivation arises from the problems of society and then there is often a critical look at the mass media with these concerns” (Nohrstdt, Bastian and Hök, 2002:14).

Scarcity of research work in communication is strikingly conspicuous. Most of the researches conducted in Sri Lanka are done merely to fulfill a compulsory requirement of a degree program. This is equally applicable to university lecturers as well. After obtaining the required qualification they apply for vacancies or the confirmation of their post, as the case may be, and continuation of such research is consigned to oblivion.

S. Raguram (2015:278-9) head of the Department of Mass communication, University of Jaffna submits proposals and suggestions to improve media education at university level as follows.

(1) As part of the effort to advance and promote media education in universities, the tenet and knowledge of media professionals should be incorporated in the teaching program.

(2) Media education should be provided at different levels, according to the needs, expectations and goals of the target audience.

(3) The curriculum and syllabus should be reviewed from time to time according to the requirements of the job market.

(4) There must be increased opportunities to study the different aspects of media education.

(5) An appropriate mechanism should be arranged by university academics to cater to the educational needs of schools. Teachers and students should be encouraged to engage in the 'Communication and Media Studies' subject at G.C.E. Ordinary Level and advance levels.

(6) Research efforts should be increased to find a system of media education suitable for Sri Lanka. Texts for media education in local languages should be provided where

required.

(7) Master's Degree and research programs should be started in universities and lecturers appointed at a senior level.

(8) Arrangements should be made with professional media outlets to provide work experience for academics if they do not have such background.

(9) The selection of the language of learning should be flexible and students should be allowed to deal with creative sections of media education thorough their mother tongue as they choose.

(10) Journalists, who are working in the professional field, but without the academic qualifications expected by the university system, should be allowed to share their experiences and to take part in discussions and other informal teaching sessions, and their services should be properly recognized.

(11) There should be a good rapport with professional media outlets to ensure that internships and training for students become mandatory.

(12) To avoid complete dependency on professional media outlets for internship opportunities for the students, universities should have basic facilities and infrastructure to provide media training at least to a certain level.

(13) Interest in media research should be encouraged in the academic and the professional field.

(14) Media freedoms and activities designed to protect freedom of expression should be supported'.

Asian, African and Latin American scholars had clearly recognized the problem of Euro centrism in social science although they have not become renowned for developing original non-Western social theories (Gunarathne,2010).

Communication studies, are developed with Anglo-American based western perspectives. The time is opportune for the advent of Mass Communication and Journalism paradigm unique to Asia. This paradigm should be compatible with the philosophical, social,

cultural and economic context of Asia.

Conclusion:

Mass Media/Mass Communication education in Sri Lanka is confronted with many obstacles in the course of acquiring recognition among standardized and conventional academia. The haphazard manner of revision of Mass Media and Mass Communication curricula pertaining to secondary and tertiary education detrimentally affect achieving expected outcomes in media and communication education. Incompatibility of academia and the demands of media industry is a classic paradigm of the irrationality and the impracticability with which media education is perceived and operated in Sri Lanka. Education policy makers should revise and revamp media education in an objective manner in keeping with contemporary developments while enabling the students to meet the current demands in the sphere of mass media and communication.

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