

Media Framing of 2015 Sri Lanka Presidential Election: Content Analysis of Daily News and Daily Mirror

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Abstract- This study analyzed print media framing of the 2015 Sri Lanka Presidential Election coverage. A total of 603 news stories and editorials from two leading newspaper “Daily News” and “Daily Mirror” are selected for the study published during the period of 21st November 2014 to 13th of January 2015. The study considers the postulates of “Agenda Setting” and “Framing” to examine the 2015 election. The study focused on Equivalence frame, Game frame, Interparty relation frame, Issue frame and Emphasis frame. The following questions were asked: Was there a difference in the editorial coverage of selected English newspapers? What were the dominant issues discussed in the Presidential Election coverage? Which election frame got the maximum newspaper's coverage? Which newspaper performed the watchdog role regarding the coverage of Presidential Election 2015? Which newspapers favored to which candidate, regarding his campaign leading up to the presidential election? Overall, the findings of this study revealed Equivalence frame was the most dominant frame used in the coverage of the 2015 Sri Lanka Presidential Election. Issues of Peace (Terrorism) and Corruption were the most discussed in the coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election. As well as researcher investigate the consistency of editorial policy and the watchdog role playing by the selected press. Newspaper coverage can have a positive or negative impact on the image of an individual. The study reveals that the two organizations framed the information differently. Media played the roles of informing, persuading, educating, and acted as the agenda setter to its audience by putting more emphasis on some issues.

Indexed Terms- Media Framing, Agenda Setting, Watchdog Roll, Editorial Policy, Presidential Election

I. INTRODUCTION

Political elections are among the very important events in democratic societies and countries. The election is a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Sri Lanka has a multi-party system, with two dominant political parties. Media is like a bridge between politicians and people. Media is a debate forum which provides opportunities to candidates and political parties to highlight their manifesto and shape public opinions.

Sri Lanka 2015 Presidential Election was held in Sri Lanka on 8 January 2015, two years ahead of schedule. According to the constitution, the normal term of office for a President is six years. The incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa contested as the United People Freedom Alliance candidate, seeking an unprecedented third term. On 21st of November 2014, the Sri Lankan Commissioner of Elections declared the election date as 8th of January 2015. 19 candidates subsequently submitted their nomination papers. Of these 19 candidates, only two were considered serious contenders; one is being the incumbent President Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa and Mr. Maithripala Sirisena representing the New Democratic Front. He was the General-Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and was Minister of Health until November 2014 when he announced his candidacy for the 2015 Presidential Election as the opposition coalition's "common candidate." Maithripala Sirisena was declared the winner after receiving 51.28% of all votes cast compared to Mahinda Rajapaksa's 47.58%. Turnout was 81.52%, the highest for a Sri Lankan Presidential Election and significantly more than the 2010 presidential election. Maithripala Sirisena was the winner in 12 electoral districts while Mahinda Rajapaksa was victorious in the remaining 10.

This Presidential Election was the most competitive election in Sri Lanka since the introduction of the beginning of multiparty elections. As well as, this election grabbed the attention of both inside and outside observers.

Selected two newspapers are currently leading regarding sales and circulations in Sri Lanka. One is a Government newspaper, and another one is a private newspaper. Both newspapers are published daily except Sunday. Both Newspapers has high circulation data. Daily News has 88000 circulations, and Daily Mirror has a circulation about 76,000. They all have online versions <http://dailynews.lk> for Daily News and <http://dailymirror.lk> for Daily Mirror. Both newspapers are published daily except Sundays. These newspapers are popular icons of English press of Sri Lanka.

Objectives of the Study are to Study the role of print media during the Presidential Election 2015, to study the editorial's role of selected newspapers during the Presidential Election and to study the dominant issues discussed during Presidential Election.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As Iqbal N.C & Ashraf A, (2012) quoted the relationship between media and politics has always been an important area of political communication. Media is responsible to inform, to educate, to provide a platform for public, to give publicity and channel for political advocacy in democratic societies. The press always focuses on politics and different political issues in their contents. [1] [2]

New media has changed the traditional ways of working even in the political sphere. Nowadays, due to websites, blogs and other links of information politics are more interactive, and the concept of 'electronic democracy' or 'e-democracy' is more common. But still, mainstream media is considered more credible as a source of political news. [3]

As ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (2012) mentioned, in today's politics and society at large, media is essential to the safeguarding transparency of democratic processes, it is often called its 'watchdog' role. Transparency is required on many levels

including for access to information; accountability and legitimacy of individuals, institutions, and processes themselves; and for rightful participation and public debate. [4]

During the election period, media should play a watchdog role. There may be pressure on the election commission from political or other powerful interests. The parties may try to do everything to win the election. It will be difficult for the election commission to catch every trick and abuse that may occur... That is why a reliable media is needed as a watchdog against corruption and illegal activity in the election. [5] Freedom is when the people can speak. Democracy is when the government listens. The media is the messenger. So especially in Presidential Election period media framing is an important part of the political communication field. Framing theory is frequently used by scholars examining the impact of political communication.

This study is based on the framing theory and Agenda setting theory. The two theories provide an in-depth understanding of how mass media influence on individuals in the process of processing information. Agenda setting looks at the story selection, placing and the salience of issues while framing theory looks in particular ways those issues are presented. Another way to look at the relationship between these two theories, agenda-setting tells the audience what to think about through the selection of the stories or objects in media, while framing tells how to think about a particular issue. [6]

Robert Entman (1993), who defined media framing as a process by which the media "select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in a way that can promote a certain definition, interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation".[7]

Agenda-setting theory describes the "ability (of the news media) to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda." That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important. Agenda-setting theory was formally developed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study on the 1968 USA Presidential Election.

III. METHODOLOGY

For this study, the content analysis method is used to evaluate the front page news stories and editorials published by two leading Sri Lankan Newspapers “Daily News” and “Daily Mirror.” These newspapers are playing an important role in presenting national and international issues following the editorial policies of their own. The period is from November 21st 2014 to January 13th. On 21st November 2014, the Sri Lankan Commissioner of Elections declared that elections were scheduled for 8th January 2015. For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the non-random convenience sampling procedure to obtain 262 (218 front page stories and 44 editorials) from *Daily News* newspaper and 341 (302 front page stories and 39 editorials) from *Daily Mirror* newspaper for the content analysis. Therefore there was a total of 603 news stories. Researcher obtained data from online versions of the two selected newspapers. Each of the news articles was analyzed using a code sheet that was developed by the researcher to help answer the research questions. The researcher used quantitative techniques with the help of tables, graphs, and charts to analyze the findings of the study. The qualitative analysis method is used to identify the newspaper which played the watch-dog role during the election. By watch-dog role, researchers meant that which newspaper was more critical to cover electoral issues during this period. So researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods for data analyzing.

IV. DISCUSSION

Christoper (2016) quoted, Evans and Gruba (2003), urges on the importance of discussion in a research study to allow a researcher to examine the meanings of the key findings of the research and identify the lessons which have been learned out of the research study. [8]

RQ1. Was there a difference in the editorial coverage of selected English newspapers?

Editorials are the element of newspapers which establish the political character of any newspaper and also called ‘Voice’ of a newspaper.[2] According to editorial coding, results researcher identified some

major different between both newspaper’s editorial coverage according to their editorial policies.

According to the results Daily News newspaper had 4.5% neutral editorials, and Daily Mirror had 43.6% neutral editorial coverage. Daily News newspaper had 95.5% positive editorials, and Daily Mirror had 5.1% editorial coverage. 13 editorials of Daily News newspaper focused on Maithripala Sirisena and from those only 2 editorials were favorable. Those editorials also published after the election. Daily Mirror had 2 editorials for Mahinda Rajapaksa and 13 editorials for Maithripala Sirisena.

RQ2. What were the dominant issues discussed in the Presidential Election coverage?

Both newspapers had discussed 7 main issues relevant to the Presidential Election. Those were Education, Health, Infrastructures, Corruption, Peace, Economic Growth and Executive Presidency. Peace was the most covered issue in Daily News newspaper with 54 news stories. Corruption was the most covered issue in Daily Mirror newspaper with coverage of 22 news stories. The second most covered issue was the Executive Presidency in both newspapers. Daily News had 20 news stories, and Daily Mirror had 17 news stories on Executive presidency issue. Newspapers have given their priorities according to their policies and agendas.

As a country which was suffered more than 30 years devastating international conflict, Sri Lankans pay more attention to peace and security. During the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s Government, Sri Lanka could end the war and achieve the peace. So, Daily News newspaper gave more space to talk about Peace issue- the achievement of the previous Government.

“While nothing that political stability and peace, which were absent during the long drawn out conflict spanning nearly 30 years, were the key catalysts in the country’s impressive economic growth and overall development”. (02nd of December 2014 Daily News)

According to the opposition sources, former Government was accused of many corruption

scandals. Therefore, Daily Mirror newspaper had given more space to the issue of Corruption. Comparing with both newspapers' editorials, Daily Mirror could be considered as the one, which had discussed more issues.

“Corruption, Corruption: Plunder of Billion” (29th of November 2014, Daily Mirror editorial)

Other than above mentioned two major issues, these two newspapers had discussed more other issues. Daily News newspaper had focused on Privatizing, Media Freedom, Stability, Nepotism, Natural Disasters, Poverty, Agriculture, Foreign elements, Democracy, Fisheries, Casino, Employment and War crime. Daily Mirror had focused on Media freedom, Bribe, Nepotism, Employment, Election violence, Agriculture, Foreign elements, State media unbalance, Public service, Good governance, Stability and Media bias.

RQ3. Which election frame got the maximum newspaper's coverage?

Equivalence frame had 49.6% news coverage in Daily News newspaper and 34.6% in Daily Mirror newspaper. The game frame had 7.3% news coverage in Daily News Newspaper and 2.3% in Daily Mirror newspaper. Interparty relation frame had 9.5% news coverage in Daily News newspaper and 11.7% in Daily Mirror newspaper. Issue frame had 8.8% news coverage in Daily News newspaper and 4.7% in Daily Mirror newspaper. Emphasis frame had 13% news coverage in Daily News newspaper and 14.1% in Daily Mirror newspaper.

Equivalence frame emerged as the dominant frame with the total 130 from Daily News and 118 from Daily Mirror. Equivalence frame involves the negative and the positive portrayal. It involves the use of the tone addressing issues and portraying the candidates. Emphasis frame was the second dominant frame. Emphasis frame is among the common frames in the political communication. It is so when media put more emphasis on issues. Daily News had 34 emphasis frame News, and Daily Mirror had 48 news stories with emphasis frame.

“President most pragmatic among world leaders.”(28th of November 2014 Daily News)

“Mammoth crowds have sealed by victory.”
(19th of December 2014 Daily News)

RQ4. Which newspaper performed the watchdog role regarding the coverage of Presidential Election 2015? By watch-dog role, researchers meant that newspaper's critical view on covering electoral issues during the relevant time period. The researcher found a significant different on this between both newspapers. Daily News newspaper did not have any Negative tone while Daily Mirror had 155 negative tones. Further, Daily Mirror had more percentage of the neutral tone news stories (23.5%). Daily News newspaper had 4.5% neutral editorials, and Daily Mirror had 43.6% of neutral editorial coverage. Daily News newspaper had 95.5% of positive editorials, and Daily Mirror had 5.1% of editorial coverage. Even Daily News did not have any negative editorial coverage; Daily Mirror had 51.3% of negative editorial coverage.

According to results of abrasive comments of Presidential candidates, Daily News had 61 news stories different for both candidates. There were 63 abrasive news stories for Maithripala Sirisena and 2 News stories for Mahinda Rajapaksa. As shown in Table 7, Daily Mirror had 39 abrasive news stories for Mahinda Rajapaksa and 11 abrasive news for Maithripala Sirisena.

Daily Mirror newspaper's editorials had focused on the election violence of the Government side.

“Stop the abuse of state media.”

“A free, fair and peaceful election is the foundation of democracy. One of the key pillars for this is an independent media through which the people could get fair, accurate and balanced information to make an informed choice at the crucial presidential election on January 8. (02nd of January 2015 Daily Mirror editorial)

Also, Daily Mirror newspaper published neutral editorials for informing the election responsibilities for government and opposition parties.

“Also needed urgently are the revival of an independent judicial service, an independent Police service, an independent public service and an independent Elections Commission. On the socio-economic front, we see a monstrosity where about 1% of the people, comprising mainly the ruling elite, have control over about 60% of the country’s wealth. This structure also needs to be changed to bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources. We need to remember that the answer to poverty is not more wealth but justice. So let justice be done on January 8.” (10th Of December Daily Mirror editorial)

“The common Opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena, widely seen to be growing in stature and popularity, took a major step in the campaign for the Presidential Election on January 8 by presenting a manifesto combining the highest spiritual dimensions of the Dhamma with the ground realities of today’s situation....Mr. Sirisena has pledged he will stop mega corruption and wastage and act to provide the country with development ten times that of the past six years and provide relief to the people. (20th December 2014 Daily Mirror editorial)

CONCLUSION

RQ5. Which newspapers favored to which candidate, regarding his campaign leading up to the Presidential Election?

Daily News had 115 focus news stories on Mahinda Rajapaksa and 58 news stories on Maithripala Sirisena. Daily News newspaper had 117 favorable news stories on Mahinda Rajapaksa and 9 news stories on Maithripala Sirisena. There were 63 abrasive news stories on Maithripala Sirisena and 2 News stories on Mahinda Rajapaksa.

“Presidents leadership still needed by the country” (31st of December 2014 Daily News)

“UNP will lead Maithripala by the nose” (24th of December 2014 Daily News)

As a government newspaper, Daily News always favored to the Government’s agenda. During pre-election period, Daily News favored to Mahinda Rajapaksa and during the post-election period it favored to new President Maithripala Sirisena. The study’s findings showed that Daily Mirror had 155 negative news stories for Mahinda Rajapaksa. Daily Mirror had 11 abrasive news stories on Maithripala Sirisena while 39 abrasive news stories on Mahinda Rajapaksa. Even though it published 11 abrasive news stories on Maithripala Sirisena. Daily Mirror did not have any abrasive editorials on Maithripala Sirisena. However, there was 15.4% of abrasive editorial coverage on Mahinda Rajapaksa. By Editorial coverage, Daily Mirror showed which candidate they favored.

The study revealed that these two English newspapers covered the different news ways with their agendas. Hussain, Ahmed, (2016) quoted, Siraj (1997) under the heading of “Media Hegemony” stating that “the assumption of media hegemony is that the ideas of the ruling class become ruling ideas in society”. [9][10] As a Government newspaper, Daily News favored to the ruling party and Daily Mirror favored to the opposition. Daily News newspaper did not publish any negative news on Mahinda Rajapaksa. But during the post-election period after Government change, it published one (1) abrasive editorial on Mahinda Rajapaksa. Even Daily Mirror newspaper published more negative news stories on ruling party; they published some negative news stories on the opposition as well. But Daily Mirror did not publish any abrasive editorial on Maithripala Sirisena. By editorial policies, Daily Mirror showed their media agendas. Further, Daily Mirror had more percentage of neutral news stories than Daily News. Daily Mirror newspaper played the watchdog role by publishing more critical editorials on the election issues.

Both newspapers had given their priorities for different issues according to their agendas. During the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa’s Government Sri Lanka could end the war and achieved the peace. So, Daily News newspaper gave more space to talk about the Peace issue. According to the opposition sources, former government was accused of many corruption scandals. Therefore, Daily Mirror newspaper had given more space to the issue of Corruption.

Equivalence frame emerged as the Dominant with total 130 from Daily News and 118 from Daily Mirror. Equivalence frame involves the negative and the positive portrayal. It involves the use of the tone addressing issues or in portraying the candidates.

Elections are a great challenge for the media. Journalists need to know the election rules. As ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (2012) mentioned, media needs to report about both the Government and opposition parties, how they have acted while fulfilling their duties. The people need to know how well the Government has run the country since the last election, and what alternatives the opposition parties presented during that time. Media need to maintain a high level of professionalism, accuracy, impartiality and responsibility in their coverage. Media needs democracy and for the democratic election needs media.

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