

THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND DEMOCRACY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD IN SRI LANKA: CASES OF GOVERNMENT ONLINE NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

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Abstract

The virtual public sphere (VPS) is significantly more expansive and instantaneous than anything sociologists or political theorists had previously anticipated. The Covid-19 pandemic situation impacted every sector including newspaper publishing in Sri Lanka. According to new contemporary social circumstances affect newspapers ownership started to publish their printed newspapers online. The researcher's main concern was how to influence government online newspaper readership for the virtual public sphere and democracy in Sri Lanka amid the covid-19 pandemic. For this study, three government online publications were chosen: *Daily News*, *Dinamina*, and *Thinakaran*, all of which were published between September 2020 and August 2021. The data for this study was gathered from the Lake House Department of Digital Media's database using a survey method. A sample of fifty e-newspaper readers in the western province, were given an online questionnaire. During Covid-19, this province was the most impacted. According to the findings, the *Daily News* online papers are the most popular, with *Dinamina* and *Thinakaran* readers coming in second and third. In October and November 2020, the majority of e-newspaper readers had access to online newspapers, and this population decreased in April 2021 as temporary isolations and travel restrictions were lifted. The mobile phone was the most popular device for viewing online publications among PCs and tablets. The main reasons for reading online newspapers were for ease of use and for educational purposes. The majority of e-readers are government employees. Others include private employees and businessmen. Due to the country's lockdown, travel restrictions, quarantine, and isolation, online newspapers have become the most convenient and effective resources for the VPS and Democracy in Sri Lankan newspaper readership. The government's development of a work-from-home policy was discovered to have a greater impact on rising demand for online newspaper usage and adaptation.

Keywords: virtual public sphere, democracy, covid -19 pandemic, online newspapers, readership

1. Introduction

The public sphere is the result of the bourgeois democratic struggle against the feudal social system. The concept of a public sphere was popularized by sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, though he was not the first to discuss the idea. He points out in his book

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere that the rise of the absolute state (such as France under Louis XIV) led to a separation between society and the state as the growing bourgeois society of the middle class sought to counteract the state's increasing social control and political centralization (<http://www.clioscurrent.com/blog/2013/9/19/the-virtual-public-sphere>, 2013).

In a feudal regime, the ruler stood for the right of his own hereditary heritage instead of the views of the people. Accordingly, in the construction of the theoretical planes of the public sphere, subjects such as sociology, economics, law, and political science, social and cultural history came to light. According to Habermas, the public sphere is our social trajectory in which we can build something called public opinion (Paranavithana,2008). It was only with the collapse of the feudal system that man had the opportunity to break free from state authority and negotiate freely. Accordingly, the idea that the citizen is an independent and open agent free from government or state authority was incorporated into the society. It provided an opportunity to logically investigate the functioning of state power and to create public opinion on it. As a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed, the liberal public sphere took shape in the specific historical circumstance of a developing market economy (Habermas, Burger & Lawrence, 1991). Accordingly, the Public Sphere is not subject to government, civil society or the market. The uniqueness of Public Sphere is that it exposes a social space that is not subject to civil society, government or the market and paves the way for building a positive public opinion through it (Dissanayake,2004).

The virtual public sphere is significantly more expansive and instantaneous than anything sociologists or political theorists had previously anticipated. Individuals can express themselves freely online and are exposed to the views of a much larger number of people than they can in the actual world. It is also contested, just like the public sphere. As Arendt's critique implies, we may have already lost the war against Habermas' "colonization" of the public sphere in our physical society (<http://www.clioscurrent.com/blog/2013/9/19/the-virtual-public-sphere>, 2013). The proliferation of communication practices across the Internet was aided by the development of technology processes at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This, along with a number of other reasons, finally resulted in the modification or distortion of many public practices of individual interactions, prompting some scientists to consider applying Jürgen Habermas' public sphere concept to the new emergent Internet environment (Tovmasyan,2020). Specifically, the electronic networks that made contemporary

globalization possible also led to the emergence of "virtual public spheres" and, in turn, 'Internetworked Social Movements' (Langman,2005).

Merriam- Webster define that newspaper is a paper that is printed and distributed usually daily or weekly and that contains news, articles of opinion, features, and advertising. According to the Collins Dictionary, Newspaper is a publication consisting of a number of large sheets of folded paper, on which news, advertisements, and other information is printed. However, Online Newspaper is an online newspaper is the online version of a newspaper, either as a stand-alone publication or as the online version of a printed periodical.

Every country, including Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, has an online newspaper. According to historical records, Japan's "The Asahi Shimbun" newspaper was the first online newspaper in Asia. In 1995, India launched its first online newspaper. They launched two online publications, "The Hindu" and "The Times of India." On September 4, 1995, the first Sri Lankan online newspapers, "Daily News" and "Sunday Observer," were established. The Lake House is the publisher of both of these newspapers. "Lankadeepa," the first Sinhala-language internet newspaper, debuted in 1996. Similarly, in 1998, "Daily Mirror" and "Divaina," "The Island" online newspapers were founded. In 1996, however, "Dinamina" and "Thinakaran" were released. The majority of daily publications are now hybrid newspapers. That is, both print and online copies of the papers are available. Online newspapers are typically available in PDF and e- edition formats.

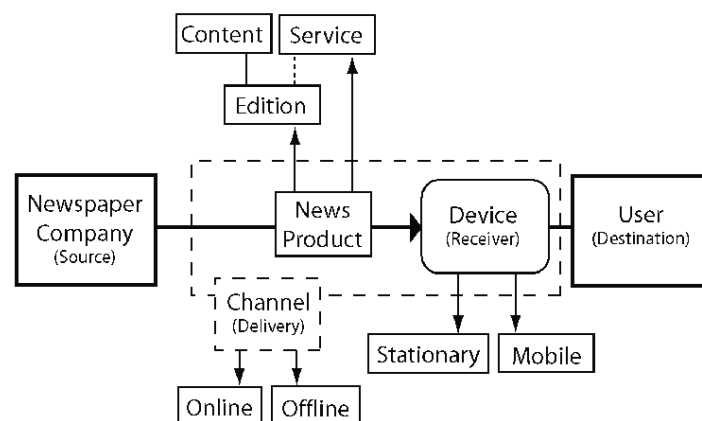


Figure 1. Online Newspaper Readership

Leckner, S., & Appelgren, E. (2007). E-paper News Publishing. *Nordicom Review*, 28(2), 25-50.

Covid-19 pandemic started in Wuhan, China at the end of December 2019. Gradually it became a global pandemic all over the world. Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian countries

affected by the novel Covid-19. The first outbreak of the Covid-19 in Sri Lanka was detected with a Chinese tourist on 27th January 2020, and the infected local person was identified on 11th March 2020 (Erandi, Mahasinghe, Perera, & Jayasinghe, 2020). The first wave was started on 27th January 2020 and it went till 9th March 2020. Now we completed the face to the fourth wave of the Corona Pandemic. Due to this situation started temporary lockdown, travel restrictions, Isolations, and government establishment of work from home policy. During the covid-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, there were six clusters detected. Welisara Navy Camp, Minuwangoda and Divulapitiya clusters, University cases, Colombo National Hospital, Katunayaka Investment Zone, and Peliyagoda fish market clusters are only a few examples.

This issue has an impact on newspaper distribution as well. As a result, most newspaper businesses attempt to launch online newspapers in order to meet the need for news among Sri Lankan newspaper readers. When it comes to Coronavirus clusters, the majority of them start in the Western province. Gampaha, Kaluthara, and Colombo are also the most afflicted districts during the pandemic. This study, according to them, is limited to government online newspapers and newspaper readers in the western province. This study examines how to influence government online newspaper readership for the virtual public sphere and democracy in Sri Lanka during the covid-19 pandemic.

2. Research Methodology

Survey method was used for this research. Therefore, collected data on the online newspapers of Daily News, Thinakaran, and Dinamina published from September 2020 to August 2021 from the database of the department of digital media in Lake House. Those data are auto-generated on that database when online readers access that specific online paper. Hence, this data shows only technical usage and the researcher wanted to explore the actual needs of the e-paper readers to take the results of virtual public sphere and democracy in Sri Lanka during the covid-19 pandemic. With the intention of distributing 50 online questionnaires among the online newspaper readers who are living in Western province. The reason for this selection is Western province was the most affected area during the pandemic time and most of our major newspapers are printed and published from the Western province. The selective sample used for this survey and 23 questionnaires distributed to the Colombo district, 18 to Kaluthara, and 9 to Gampaha district. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to analyze the data before coming to a conclusion.

Table 1. Questionnaires distribution

Districts	Quantity	Percentage
Colombo	23	46%
Kaluthara	18	36%
Gampaha	9	18%
Total	50	100%

According to database from the digital media department of the Lake House, Dinamina online newspaper users are available between 9776 to 14534 during the selected time period. Daily News online users are available between 20,984 to 26,552 and Thinakaran online newspaper users are available between 5158 to 7332.

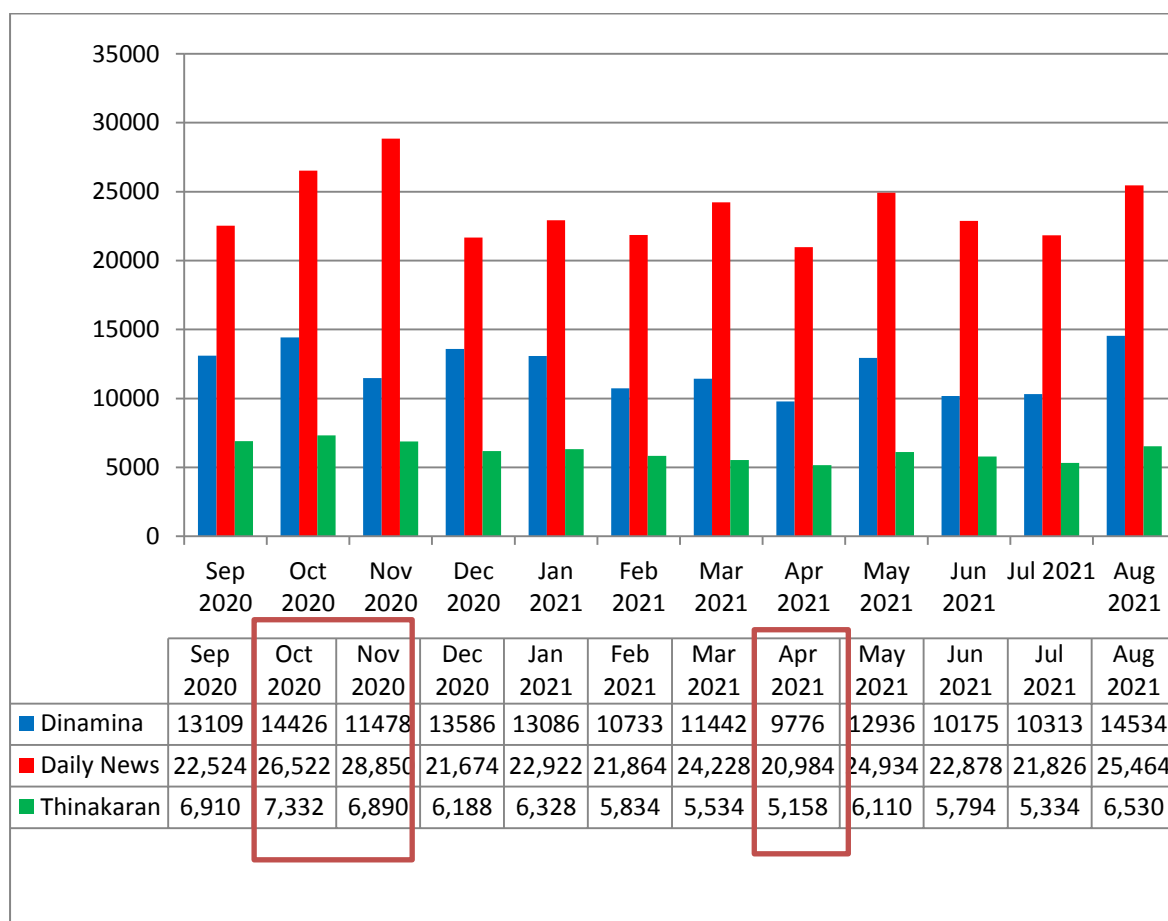


Figure 1. All User Cross Analyze with Dinamina, Daily News, and Thinakaran

3. Analysis

According to an analysis of Dinamina, Daily News, and Thinakaran users, from October to November 2020, the majority of people will have access to online newspapers (Figure 01). The second wave of the Covid-19 began during this time, and most of the area was placed on temporary lockdown. However, according to this data, online users decreased in April. The administration decided to lift the temporary closure in April because it was New Year's celebration season. As a result, printed newspapers began to circulate. This factor may have an impact on the outcome. The Daily Newspaper is available on most e-readers. Dinamina and Thinakaran finished second and third, respectively. When comparing questionnaire data to the outcomes, the same conclusions were reached. As a result, 30% of people read Daily News e-papers and 26% read Dinamina. 4% of people read Thinakaran. Another 4% are read all three of these newspapers and according to the sample, 36% of people do not read government newspapers (Figure 02).

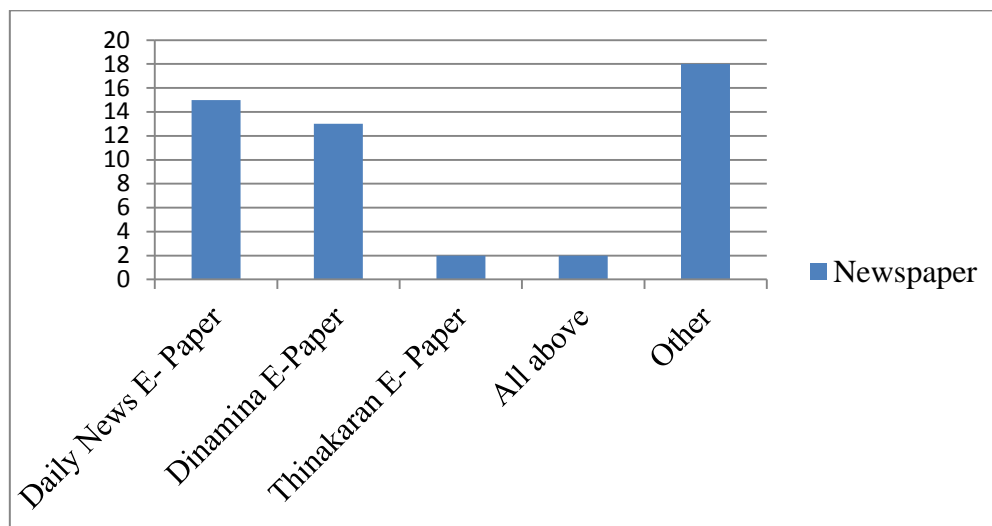


Figure 2. Online Newspaper Readership

According to the Database in Lake House Digital Media Department, most of the e-newspaper readers are used Mobile phones for access to e-paper and desktop computers and tablets came as second and third devices. Dinamina online publications were most accessible on mobile phones in October 2020 and August 2021. In November 2020 and August 2021, mobile access to the Daily News will be at its peak. The majority of Thinakaran newspaper readers utilized mobile phones in October and November 2020. When compared to the survey data, 80 percent of users stated they used their mobile phones to access e-newspapers, 10% said they used tablets, and 5% said they used PCs or desktop computers (Figure 03).

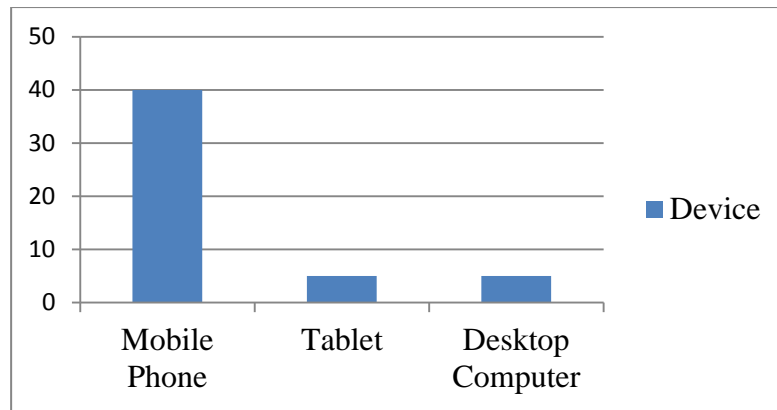


Figure 3. Online Newspaper Reading Device

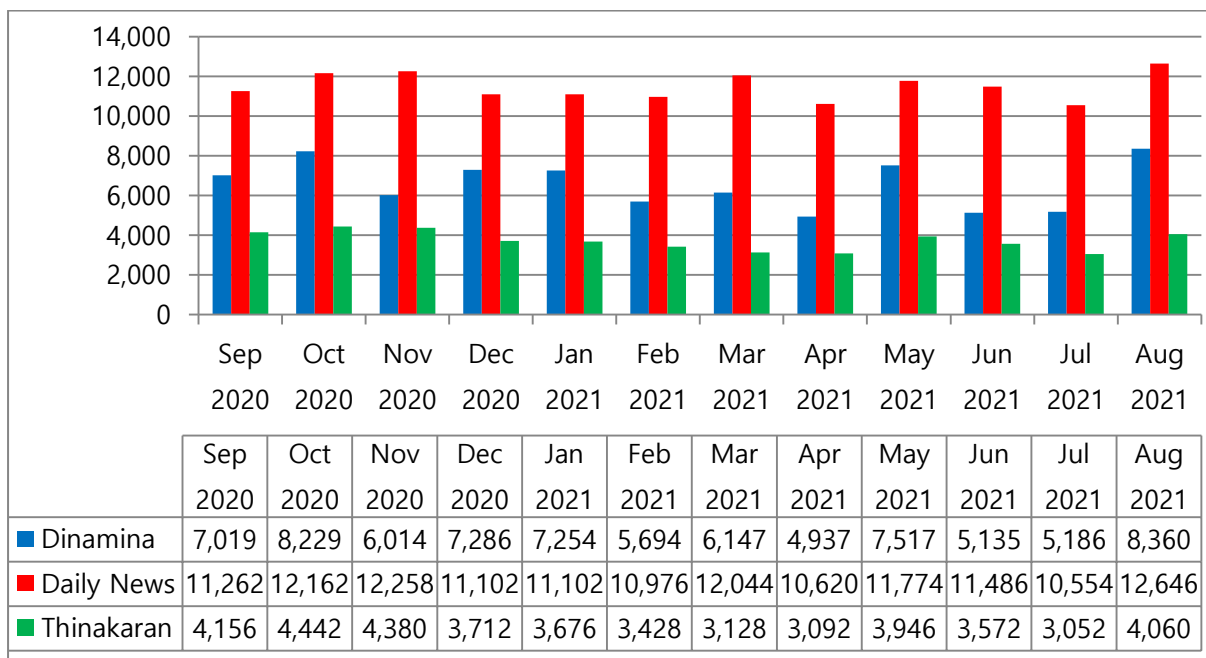


Figure 4. Dinamina, Daily news and Thinakaran Mobile User Cross Analyze

According to the survey data, most of the online newspaper readers read this papers for News purposes. During this period most of the news based on the covid-19 infected data and the economic crisis because of the temporary lockdowns taken by the government few times. Also, during this time e-newspapers are consist with the articles regarding the health guidelines and the education base articles. Sri Lankan national schools and universities are temporary lockdown and start the online teaching- learning method. Therefore, newspapers are try to fill that space from their media. This reason could be directly affect to their purpose of e newspaper reading came as education purpose.

Table 2. Reading purpose of Online Newspaper

Why do you read online newspapers?	Count	Percentage
For Education Purpose	11	22%
For Business Purpose	1	2%
For News Purpose	16	32%
For Entertainment Purpose	0	0%
Failed to buy a printed newspaper	2	4%
Easy Usage	15	30%
Attractiveness	0	0%
Other	5	10%
Total	50	100%

Government employees make up the majority of e-readers. Private employees and business owners are among the others. The bulk of readers began to utilize online newspapers after five years. Because of the epidemic, 30% of people are starting at the age of one year. The bulk of e-newspaper consumers read online newspapers during the outbreak.

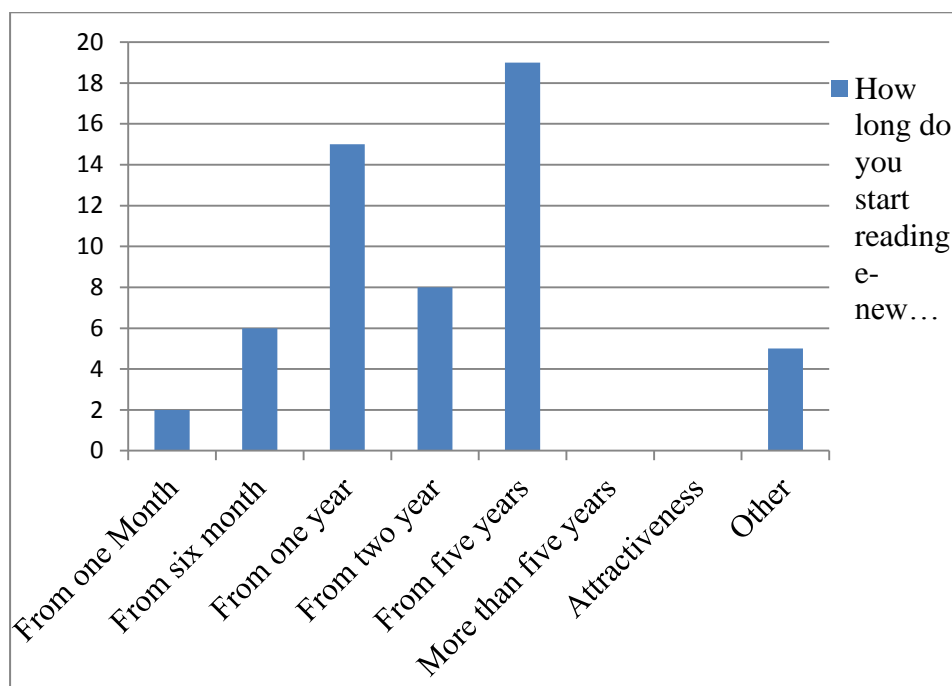


Figure 5. Online Newspaper Readership Starting time

During the covid-19 pandemic, 56 percent of e-newspaper readers claimed they could readily access online newspapers, while 36 percent said they could only do so occasionally. The majority of e-readers are aware of the distinction between hybrid and traditional newspapers, however 17 readers in the sample were unaware of the distinction.

Table 3. Idea about difference of Hybrid and e-Newspapers

Do you have idea about difference of Hybrid news paper and E- Newspaper?	Count	Percentage
Yes	22	44%
No	17	34%
Quite a bit	11	22%
Total	50	100%

4. Conclusion

Since the press has a strong position in the Sri Lankan public space, it is clear that the press has also played a significant role in creating the virtual public space during the Covid 19 epidemic. According to the online newspapers of the Lake House, the state media agency used for the research, it is clear that the new social status and technological virtual public space associated with the Covid 19 epidemic also influenced newspaper receipts and their ideology. Due to the lockdown of the country, travel restrictions, quarantine, and isolation, online newspapers became the most convenient and effective means for the Sri Lankan newspaper audience to stay informed. It was discovered that the government's establishment of a work-from-home policy had a stronger impact on increasing demand for online newspaper usage and adaptation. As a result, may conclude that during the covid-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, the government's online newspaper readership influenced the virtual public sphere and democracy.

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