

Ethnic Minority Press and the Mediation of Community Demands: The Case of Tamil Newspapers in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

Ethnic minority journalism in deeply divided societies presents a paradox: while minority media seek to articulate community demands, they operate under the structural dominance of majoritarian political orders. This paper examines the role of Tamil newspapers in Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on *Virakesari*, the most influential Tamil-language daily. The analysis explores how Tamil journalists negotiate their professional roles amid pressures of state censorship, organizational constraints, militant expectations, and community divisions. Drawing on an ethnographic approach—including interviews with journalists, observations of newsroom dynamics, and archival research—the study situates the Tamil press within wider debates on nationalism, identity, and minority representation. Findings reveal a pattern of “strategic conformity,” where Tamil newspapers balance competing imperatives: voicing grievances, avoiding state retaliation, and preserving commercial viability. Ethnographic accounts highlight how journalists navigate dilemmas over covering state violence, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) militancy, and the marginalization of plantation Tamils. The study concludes that while Tamil newspapers created limited counter-public spheres, their mediation of community demands was heavily circumscribed by political repression and organizational dependency. Implications for press freedom and minority representation in transitional democracies are considered.

Keywords: Ethnic Press, Tamil Newspapers, Sri Lanka, Journalism, Organizational Ethnography, Minority Representation

Introduction:

The relationship between the media and ethnic minority communities has long been a subject of contention in multicultural and divided societies. While the press is often celebrated as a forum for pluralism, research has shown that ethnic minority media operate under severe constraints when articulating alternative discourses in dominant national frameworks (Curran, 1991). In postcolonial states, where nationalism and identity

politics have become entangled with the imperatives of state-building, minority journalism occupies a precarious position: simultaneously an instrument of community representation and a site of state surveillance.

Sri Lanka provides a striking case study. Since independence in 1948, the country has been shaped by Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian nationalism (Goonasekara, 1999). Tamil claims to recognition—grounded in historical narratives of a

Tamil kingdom, linguistic distinctiveness, and cultural identity—were progressively excluded from the state’s institutional and constitutional frameworks (Dissanayake, 1999). Tamil grievances over language policy, standardization in education, and land settlement programs intensified polarization, culminating in a civil war between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009.

Within this context, Tamil newspapers such as *Virakesari*, *Thinakaran*, and *Eelakesari* sought to represent minority perspectives. Yet, the extent to which they embodied “the voice of the community” is open to question. This paper addresses two interrelated questions:

1. How have Tamil journalists represented themselves as spokesmen of an ethnic minority within a Sinhala-dominated political order?
2. What organizational and political constraints shaped their ability to disseminate competing truths?

Using an ethnographic approach that integrates interviews, newsroom observations, and secondary sources, the study demonstrates that Tamil journalism was caught between professional ideals and political realities. While newspapers articulated grievances and mediated demands, they simultaneously conformed to the state’s disciplinary structures and commercial imperatives (Pathmanathan, 1964). The paradoxes of ethnic minority journalism in Sri Lanka offer broader insights into the challenges of media pluralism in transitional democracies.

Literature Review:

Nationalism, Ethnicity, and the Press:

Nationalism has been conceptualized as both an ideology and a program of action (Kellas, 1991). Nationalist movements derive legitimacy from objective factors such as language, territory, and history, as well as subjective dimensions of loyalty and cultural association. Anderson’s (1983) notion of nations as “imagined communities” emphasizes the role of print capitalism in fostering collective identities. Newspapers, in particular,

enable individuals to imagine themselves as part of a wider community by sharing narratives, symbols, and grievances.

The relationship between the press and minority nationalism, however, is fraught with tension. Mosca (1939) observed that societies are inherently divided into groups with distinct sentiments and interests, and media frequently privilege dominant discourses. Curran (1991) similarly demonstrated how British media, despite a pluralist veneer, structurally aligned with elite power. For minority communities, ethnic presses have historically functioned as counter-public spheres (Fraser, 1990), providing alternative narratives and mobilizing ethnic solidarity. Yet, their autonomy is undermined by state repression, market constraints, and internal divisions.

Ethnic Media in Divided Societies:

Scholarship on ethnic media in conflict-prone contexts shows that minority journalism often oscillates between advocacy and survival. In Northern Ireland, for instance, Catholic newspapers played an important role in articulating nationalist grievances while simultaneously facing state censorship (Rolston & Miller, 1996). Similarly, research on African-American presses in the United States reveals their role in both representing community concerns and negotiating systemic pressures (Gross, 1991). These experiences resonate with the Sri Lankan Tamil press, which sought to voice grievances against Sinhala hegemony but operated under authoritarian constraints.

Tamil Identity and the Sri Lankan State:

The Sinhala-Tamil divide in Sri Lanka has been extensively documented. Scholars argue that Sinhala nationalism privileged Buddhism and the Sinhala language as the essence of the nation (DeVotta, 2004). Tamil claims for federalism and recognition, rooted in a narrative of historical nationhood, were rejected as separatist threats. Dissanayake (1999) identifies three pillars of Tamil identity: indigeneity, the legacy of a Tamil kingdom, and cultural distinctiveness (Pathmanathan, 1964). These claims clashed with

the unitary Sinhala-Buddhist state, resulting in prolonged conflict.

The Tamil Press in Sri Lanka:

The Tamil press has a long history of mediating identity and political aspirations. Arumuga Navalar's 19th-century publications defended Hindu identity against Christian missionary influence, while mid-20th-century newspapers such as *Virakesari* became crucial vehicles of Tamil nationalist expression (Thillainathan, 1998). Wickramanayake and Kanapathipillai (1995) show how Tamil journalism oscillated between militant sympathies and moderate pragmatism. Kailasapathy (1985) critiques the neglect of plantation Tamil workers by mainstream Tamil newspapers, highlighting divisions within the Tamil community itself (Subrahmanian, 1997).

Despite their significance, Tamil newspapers remain under-researched in media studies. Existing scholarship often emphasizes state repression or militant propaganda but rarely examines the ethnographic experiences of journalists themselves. This study fills that gap by situating Tamil journalism within the organizational ethnography of newsrooms and the lived experiences of reporters.

Methodology:

Research Design: Ethnography in Organizational Contexts

This study adopts an organizational ethnographic approach to investigate Tamil newspapers in Sri Lanka. Organizational ethnography emphasizes understanding the cultural, social, and political practices embedded within professional institutions (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). By examining newsroom routines, hierarchies, and informal practices, this approach illuminates how journalists navigate competing pressures from the state, militant groups, community expectations, and commercial imperatives.

Ethnography was particularly appropriate for this study because Tamil journalists operate in a high-risk, politically fraught environment, where

official narratives obscure the lived realities of reporting. Direct observation of newsroom interactions and interviews with journalists allowed the researcher to capture not only what was reported but how and why editorial decisions were made, revealing the subtle mechanisms through which strategic conformity and self-censorship emerged.

Data Collection Methods:

Semi-Structured Interviews:

Twenty-two journalists, editors, and stringers were interviewed across Colombo, Jaffna, and Batticaloa. Participants ranged from senior editors at *Virakesari* to young freelance reporters. Interviews were designed to elicit narratives about professional routines, experiences of state and militant pressures, and perceptions of community representation. Questions were open-ended to allow respondents to discuss sensitive issues freely, consistent with ethnographic best practices for high-risk populations

Participant Observation:

Two Tamil newspaper offices were observed over a six-month period (2002–2003), focusing on editorial meetings, story assignments, interactions between field reporters and desk editors, and discussions about politically sensitive stories. Observations highlighted organizational hierarchies, informal norms, and negotiation strategies—for example, the prioritization of commercial concerns over community advocacy or the deployment of coded language to avoid state scrutiny.

Archival Research:

Historical issues of *Virakesari* and *Thinakaran* were reviewed alongside reports from media rights organizations and parliamentary debates. Archival analysis enabled a longitudinal understanding of coverage patterns, revealing the persistence of selective reporting, silences on plantation Tamil issues, and editorial caution under state surveillance. This triangulation of sources strengthened the study's credibility and analytic depth.

Sampling Strategy:

A purposive sampling strategy was used to capture diversity in seniority, geographic location, and community representation. Plantation Tamil journalists, often underrepresented in the mainstream Tamil press, were specifically included to examine intra-community marginalization (Kailasapathy, 1985). Sampling was iterative, allowing the researcher to follow emerging themes, consistent with ethnographic principles emphasizing theoretical and practical relevance over statistical representativeness.

Ethical Considerations:

Given the precarious security environment, anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained. Pseudonyms were assigned, and exact locations were withheld to protect participants from surveillance or retaliation. Verbal consent was preferred, reflecting participants' wariness of formal documentation in contexts of political risk. Ethical practice also involved reflexivity: the researcher continuously evaluated how their presence and positionality might influence the behavior and disclosure of participants, consistent with best practices in organizational ethnography.

Analytical Approach:

Data were analyzed using a combination of thematic and interpretive approaches, drawing on Fraser's (1990) theory of counter-publics and Curran's (1991) critique of structural alignment in minority media. Themes identified included:

- (a) State surveillance and anticipatory self-censorship
- (b) Organizational hierarchy and editorial mediation
- (c) Militant pressures and negotiated narratives
- (d) Marginalization of subaltern groups within the Tamil community

These themes were not only descriptive but interpretive, revealing the structural, political, and social constraints shaping the newsroom as a site of negotiation. The analysis emphasizes how micro-level practices within newsrooms reproduce macro-level power asymmetries, illustrating the

interplay between organizational behavior and broader socio-political structures.

Reflexivity and Theoretical Framing:

This methodology situates Tamil newspapers as mediated counter-publics that are both enabled and constrained by the structural conditions of a divided society. By combining ethnographic observation with theoretical insights, the study moves beyond a simplistic "voice versus repression" framework to show that ethnic minority media operate in spaces of ambivalence, where autonomy is contingent, representation is partial, and professional ideals are constantly negotiated.

The organizational ethnographic approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how everyday newsroom practices translate into patterns of strategic conformity, revealing the subtle ways in which journalists balance truth-telling, survival, and community representation. It also provides a model for examining minority media in other transitional democracies, where structural repression, internal hierarchies, and market pressures interact to shape mediated forms of political and cultural expression (Gross, 1991; Rolston & Miller, 1996).

Findings and Discussion:

1. State Surveillance, Self-Censorship, and the Politics of Fear:

Respondents consistently emphasized the omnipresence of state surveillance and the pervasive culture of fear under which Tamil journalists operated. One senior reporter in Jaffna recalled: "Whenever I filed a story on civilian deaths, the CID men would appear at my doorstep the next morning... After that, I learned to write cautiously—sometimes even to leave things unsaid." Such accounts reveal the structural mechanisms of repression, confirming Sivarajah's (1996) documentation of intimidation.

Critically, this demonstrates how state control operates not only through overt censorship but also through self-discipline and anticipatory compliance. Journalists internalized the logic of

state surveillance, shaping editorial choices and news framing. This aligns with Curran's (1991) argument that media in minority contexts are structurally aligned with dominant power, even when appearing to serve community interests. In effect, Tamil newspapers functioned under dual imperatives: to report grievances for their communities and to avoid state reprisal. This produced a patterned self-censorship, whereby sensitive content—particularly regarding civilian casualties, army harassment, or LTTE atrocities—was either delayed, obscured, or subtly coded.

From a theoretical perspective, this illustrates Fraser's (1990) notion of "subaltern counter-publics" as necessarily mediated spaces: they exist, but their expression is constrained and contingent. Unlike mainstream public spheres, the Tamil press could not operate autonomously; its counter-public function was contingent upon the negotiation of safety, legality, and market viability.

2. Organizational Constraints and Editorial Mediation:

Organizational structures within newspapers further limited the autonomy of journalists. A mid-career journalist explained: "The editors in Colombo were more cautious than us in the field. They worried about advertisers, about the government seizing the press. Even when we had solid stories... they would delay or water it down."

This highlights a hierarchical negotiation of risk within newsrooms, reflecting both managerial caution and the commercial imperatives of minority media. Editorial conservatism was not merely a moral choice but a strategic survival mechanism: newspapers had to preserve circulation, advertiser confidence, and political viability. Wickramanayake and Kanapathipillai (1995) similarly observed that editorial restraint in Tamil newspapers was a deliberate tactic to sustain operations under conditions of political instability (Subrahmanian, 1997).

Critically, this points to an underexplored dimension of ethnic minority journalism: the interplay between organizational culture and minority representation. Professional ethics of

truth-telling often collided with institutional priorities, producing a form of journalism that prioritized survival over advocacy. The newsroom, therefore, emerges as a microcosm of structural tension, where the ideals of community representation are negotiated within constraints of hierarchy, commercial dependence, and political risk.

3. Tensions with Militant Expectations:

Journalists were also pressured by Tamil militants, particularly the LTTE, who sought to control narratives and portray their struggle as heroic. A young reporter recounted: "They told me my reports must highlight the sacrifices of their fighters. If I wrote about civilian hardships without praising the struggle, they said I was betraying the nation."

This dual coercion—from the state and from militants—illustrates the "double bind" faced by minority journalists. While the press is often framed as an independent intermediary, Tamil newspapers were trapped between competing political sovereignties, negotiating content to avoid reprisals from either side. This challenges conventional liberal assumptions that the press functions as an autonomous watchdog, revealing instead a contingent autonomy where community representation is heavily mediated by external coercion (Rolston & Miller, 1996; Gross, 1991).

Ethnographically, journalists expressed ambivalence: while privately sympathetic to the Tamil struggle, they resented the loss of editorial control. This tension underscores a critical insight: ethnic minority media cannot be reduced to instruments of nationalist propaganda; they are arenas of negotiation, compromise, and improvisation, reflecting complex ethical dilemmas in conflict zones.

4. Marginalization of Plantation Tamils:

Plantation Tamils emerged as a largely invisible constituency within the Tamil press. A journalist based in the central highlands noted: "When estate workers were fighting for wage increases, it barely made the pages. But if a Jaffna leader made

a speech, it was front-page news. We are Tamils too, but we are invisible to the Tamil press.”

This reveals the internal stratifications of ethnic representation, where caste, class, and regional identity intersect to produce silences within minority media. The neglect of plantation Tamils illustrates that ethnic media are not inherently egalitarian; they can reproduce intra-community hierarchies, privileging urban, elite, or militant voices over subaltern groups (Kailasapathy, 1985).

Critically, this finding extends Fraser’s (1990) framework: counter-publics are not monolithic. They are fragmented and hierarchical, and their capacity to articulate grievances depends on the relative visibility and political leverage of specific subgroups. In this context, the Tamil press mediated some community demands while occluding others, reinforcing the selective, negotiated nature of minority media representation.

5. Ethnographic Insights into Newsroom Culture:

Participant observation revealed that newsroom discussions were dominated by questions of risk management rather than editorial vision. Editorial meetings frequently invoked “national security” to justify conservative choices, while younger reporters expressed frustration at the constrained professional space: “I didn’t become a journalist to be an errand boy. But most days, that’s what it feels like. We write the stories they [the editors] think won’t get us into trouble.”

This illustrates how professional ideals—accuracy, fairness, public service—were continually subordinated to survival imperatives. The newsroom emerges as a site of contested authority, where journalists negotiate the boundaries of expression, often yielding to institutional and external pressures. Such findings resonate with Ybema et al.’s (2009) conceptualization of organizational ethnography, highlighting how everyday practices, routines, and interactions mediate broader social and political dynamics.

6. Strategic Conformity and Partial Representation:

Taken together, these patterns reveal a coherent logic of strategic conformity. Tamil newspapers

sought to maintain credibility with the community, voicing grievances and affirming identity, but did so in ways that avoided provoking state or militant retaliation. As one veteran journalist summarized: “We survive by walking a tightrope... never firmly on either ground.”

Critically, this mode of journalism produces partial representation: community demands are mediated, filtered, and diluted. While newspapers provided a platform for Tamil identity, they also reflected structural and organizational constraints, privileging certain voices while silencing others. Curran’s (1991) insight that minority media are structurally aligned with dominant power is vividly illustrated here: even as newspapers serve as community platforms, their agency is circumscribed by political, commercial, and organizational dependencies.

This analysis emphasizes the complex ambivalence of ethnic minority media: they are neither wholly co-opted instruments of the state nor unqualified vehicles of resistance. Instead, they operate as negotiated arenas, balancing conflicting pressures to sustain both professional and communal legitimacy.

Concluding Observations:

The case of Tamil newspapers in Sri Lanka illustrates the paradoxes of ethnic minority journalism in divided and transitional societies. While the Tamil press functioned as a platform for articulating grievances and sustaining a sense of Tamil identity, its capacity to act as a fearless community voice was severely curtailed by state repression, militant pressures, organizational caution, and intra-community hierarchies. These constraints gave rise to what this study conceptualizes as strategic conformity, whereby Tamil newspapers balanced precariously between advocacy and survival (Curran, 1991; Sivarajah, 1996).

Yet, this conformity should not be interpreted merely as weakness or co-optation. Rather, it represents a *mode of resistance under constraint*, reflecting Fraser’s (1990) notion of “subaltern counter-publics,” where alternative discourses

persist in mediated and negotiated forms despite structural suppression. Tamil newspapers, by selectively voicing grievances—sometimes obliquely, sometimes through silences—managed to ensure that Tamil perspectives were not entirely erased from public discourse. However, this representation was partial and uneven, privileging elite or militant narratives while marginalizing plantation Tamils and other subaltern groups (Kailasapathy, 1985; Wickramanayake & Kanapathipillai, 1995).

This dynamic highlights a form of double marginalization inherent in minority media: while confronting dominant Sinhala-Buddhist state ideology, Tamil newspapers simultaneously reproduced internal inequalities within the Tamil community. The neglect of plantation Tamils underscores how caste, class, and regional divisions intersected with ethnic politics, creating silences in what was presumed to be the “voice of the Tamil nation.” Consequently, ethnic minority media emerge as both instruments of empowerment and arenas of exclusion, complicating simplistic narratives of counter-public formation (Fraser, 1990; DeVotta, 2004).

The ethnographic evidence further illuminates the limits of professional autonomy in ethnically polarized contexts. Journalists’ accounts reveal a professional field where ideals of truth-telling and watchdog responsibility were subordinated to survival imperatives, organizational loyalty, and the need to navigate coercive pressures from both the state and militants (Rolston & Miller, 1996; Sivarajah, 1996). This finding aligns with Curran’s (1991) critique that minority media are structurally constrained and often aligned, albeit unintentionally, with dominant power, even as they appear to represent community interests. Journalists’ “tightrope walk” between competing pressures exemplifies the constant negotiation required to sustain both professional integrity and personal safety.

From a normative perspective, these findings carry important implications for transitional democracies. Constitutional guarantees of press

freedom, while necessary, are insufficient to secure media pluralism. As Fraser (1990) and Curran (1991) suggest, the creation of meaningful counter-publics requires structural protections that reduce dependency on state patronage, mitigate commercial pressures, and amplify marginalized voices within minority communities themselves. For the Tamil press, this would entail both safeguarding journalists from intimidation and addressing internal hierarchies that determine whose struggles are rendered newsworthy.

Finally, this study contributes to broader debates on ethnic minority journalism by showing that counter-publics are rarely autonomous; they are deeply embedded in networks of coercion, patronage, and negotiation (Gross, 1991; Rolston & Miller, 1996). Tamil newspapers were neither mere mouthpieces for the community nor instruments of the state—they were ambivalent arenas, where journalists engaged in constant improvisation, oscillating between compliance and critique. By situating the press as a site of contested representation, this study emphasizes that ethnic minority media sustain identity and community voice under extreme constraints, yet simultaneously reflect the fractures, silences, and compromises inherent to that identity.

In this light, the Tamil press in Sri Lanka exemplifies a mediated, fragile counter-public, sustaining community narratives under siege while navigating political, organizational, and social pressures. The challenge for democratic consolidation lies in expanding the scope of minority voices beyond strategic conformity, enabling them to articulate fuller, freer, and more inclusive forms of representation that acknowledge intra-community diversity and the structural inequalities shaping media practice (Fraser, 1990; Curran, 1991; DeVotta, 2004).

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