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Unveiling the veil: A critical analysis of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media

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Abstract

Media plays a fundamental role in shaping public opinion and discourse, with print media serving as a primary source of news and information worldwide. This research critically analyzes news coverage within the print media landscape of Sri Lanka, a country marked by diverse socio-political complexities. Through in-depth interviews with journalists, editors, media analysts, and academics, the study examines media bias, agenda setting, framing of conflict and ethnic issues, representation of minorities, and the influence of political affiliations and ownership structures. Thematic analysis reveals pervasive biases, selective reporting, and challenges in equitable representation. The findings underscore the pivotal role of the media in shaping public perception and discourse, while highlighting the imperative of upholding journalistic ethics and professionalism. Addressing these challenges necessitates fostering media pluralism, promoting diversity in ownership, and ensuring adherence to ethical standards. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of media dynamics in complex socio-political contexts and underscores the importance of a free, impartial, and responsible media in fostering informed public discourse and democratic values.

Keywords: Media Bias; Agenda Setting; Conflict Framing; Minority Representation Political Influence

1. Introduction

In today's information age, media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing societal discourse. The media, particularly print media, serves as a primary source of news and information for individuals across the globe. Its power lies not only in its ability to disseminate information but also in its capacity to construct narratives, frame issues, and define agendas. Understanding the nature of news coverage within the print media is therefore essential for comprehending the dynamics of public discourse and the functioning of democratic societies. This research embarks on a critical analysis of news coverage within the print media landscape of Sri Lanka. Situated in South Asia, Sri Lanka has a diverse and complex socio-political environment, marked by a history of ethnic tensions, political upheavals, and socio-economic challenges. Against this backdrop, the examination of news coverage becomes particularly significant, as it reflects and shapes public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

The primary aim of this research is to delve into the nuances of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media, scrutinizing its content, framing, and agenda-setting functions. By employing a critical lens, this study seeks to uncover underlying patterns, biases, and agendas that may influence the portrayal of events and issues within the media landscape. Through this analysis, we aim to contribute to the broader understanding of media dynamics in a complex socio-political context and shed light on the role of media in shaping public discourse. The study of news coverage holds immense significance for several reasons. Firstly, news media serves as a crucial intermediary between events and the public, filtering and interpreting information before presenting it to audiences. As such, the content and framing of news stories have the potential to influence public perceptions and attitudes towards various issues, ranging from politics and governance to social issues and cultural phenomena (Entman, 1993). Understanding how news is constructed and disseminated is therefore vital for comprehending the dynamics of public opinion formation and societal discourse.

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Secondly, news media plays a critical role in agenda-setting, whereby certain issues and topics are prioritized over others, thus influencing the public's perception of what is important or newsworthy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Through selective reporting and framing techniques, media organizations can shape the public agenda, directing attention towards specific issues while marginalizing others. Examining the agenda-setting function of news coverage provides valuable insights into the factors that drive media attention and agenda formation within a given socio-political context. Thirdly, news coverage is inherently subject to biases, both explicit and implicit, which can manifest in various forms, including selection bias, framing bias, and ideological bias (Entman, 2007). These biases may stem from editorial decisions, institutional pressures, or individual journalists' perspectives, and they can significantly impact the way events and issues are portrayed in the media. By critically analyzing news coverage, researchers can identify and interrogate these biases, thereby revealing the underlying power dynamics and ideological underpinnings that shape media discourse.

The Sri Lankan media landscape is characterized by a diverse array of print publications, including newspapers in English, Sinhala, and Tamil languages. This diversity reflects the country's multi-ethnic and multilingual population, with each linguistic community having its own media outlets catering to its specific needs and interests. However, despite this diversity, the Sri Lankan media has faced numerous challenges, including censorship, intimidation, and political interference, particularly during periods of conflict and political unrest (Gunaratne, 2000). The end of the decades-long civil war in 2009 brought hopes of media freedom and pluralism in Sri Lanka. However, concerns about press freedom and journalistic independence persist, with reports of harassment, attacks, and censorship targeting journalists and media organizations (Freedom House, 2021). Moreover, the media landscape is also influenced by political affiliations, with certain media outlets being perceived as aligned with specific political parties or interest groups (Gunaratne, 2000). These factors underscore the complex interplay of political, social, and economic forces that shape news coverage within the Sri Lankan print media.

2. Literature review

The role of media in shaping public opinion and influencing societal discourse cannot be overstated. Particularly in countries like Sri Lanka, where historical tensions and conflicts have left deep societal divisions, the media's responsibility in fostering peace, understanding, and balanced reporting is paramount. This literature review critically examines existing research on news coverage in Sri Lankan print media, focusing on its portrayal of various societal issues, including ethnic conflicts, political events, and social issues. Sri Lanka's media landscape is diverse, comprising newspapers in multiple languages catering to various ethnic and religious communities. However, scholarly research indicates that the media environment in Sri Lanka is often polarized along ethnic and political lines (Gunaratne & Wattedegedera, 2019). This polarization significantly influences news coverage, with many outlets accused of bias and selective reporting. Ethnic conflicts, particularly between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities, have long dominated Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. Studies have shown that news coverage of these conflicts in Sri Lankan print media often reflects the biases of the respective communities (McDowell, 2017). For example, Sinhalese-majority newspapers tend to portray the conflict from a Sinhalese perspective, emphasizing national unity and security, while Tamil-majority newspapers highlight Tamil grievances and aspirations for autonomy or self-determination (Jayasuriya, 2018).

Political events in Sri Lanka often receive extensive coverage in the print media, but this coverage is frequently partisan and biased. Research by Silva and Samarasinghe (2020) found that newspapers affiliated with political parties tend to portray their respective parties in a positive light while criticizing opposition parties. This partisan reporting undermines the media's credibility and contributes to the polarization of public opinion. Sri Lankan print media's coverage of social issues, including poverty, gender inequality, and human rights abuses, is often inadequate and biased. Research by Fernando (2019) revealed that marginalized voices, such as those of women, ethnic minorities, and low-income groups, are frequently ignored or misrepresented in mainstream newspapers. This lack of representation perpetuates social inequalities and hinders progress towards a more inclusive society.

Media freedom and independence in Sri Lanka have been repeatedly challenged by government censorship, intimidation of journalists, and violence against media personnel. The State of Media Freedom in Sri Lanka report by the International Federation of Journalists (2021) documented numerous cases of harassment, attacks, and legal action against journalists critical of the government or powerful interest groups. These challenges pose significant threats to press freedom and undermine the media's ability to serve as a watchdog and advocate for democratic values. Ferdous and Khatun (2020) conducted a comprehensive study on news coverage of environmental issues in the print media of Bangladesh. Their research highlighted the significant role played by print media in disseminating information about environmental challenges, policies, and initiatives. The findings underscored the importance of balanced and comprehensive coverage in fostering public awareness and engagement towards environmental conservation. This

study provides valuable insights into the potential impact of news coverage on societal attitudes and behaviors towards pressing issues.

Similarly, Nabi (2021) explored the practice of peace journalism in the coverage of the Rohingya Crisis, focusing on Bangladeshi newspapers. Peace journalism, as conceptualized by Nabi, emphasizes the importance of ethical and constructive reporting in conflict situations. The study revealed varying degrees of adherence to peace journalism principles among different newspapers, with implications for conflict resolution and intergroup relations. By examining the role of media in framing conflicts and promoting peaceful dialogue, this research sheds light on the potential of print media to either exacerbate or mitigate social tensions. In a more recent study, Ferdous (2023) investigated the communication approach between doctors and patients regarding COVID-19, specifically analyzing mHealth apps. The research highlighted the crucial role of digital platforms in facilitating communication and dissemination of health-related information during public health crises. By examining the dynamics of doctor-patient interactions in the context of emerging technologies, this study contributes to understanding the evolving landscape of health communication and the potential of digital media to enhance healthcare accessibility and efficacy. Moreover, Nabi (2023) delved into the role of ownership in shaping online news content, employing a political economy analysis framework. The study elucidated how ownership structures influence editorial decisions, content prioritization, and media narratives, particularly in the digital sphere. By unpacking the complex interplay between ownership, ideology, and content production, this research offers critical insights into the political and economic dynamics underpinning media representation and discourse.

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the complex dynamics of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media. While the media plays a crucial role in informing the public and facilitating democratic discourse, its coverage is often influenced by political, ethnic, and economic factors. Biased reporting, lack of diversity, and threats to media freedom remain significant challenges that need to be addressed to ensure a more transparent, inclusive, and responsible media environment in Sri Lanka.

3. Methodology and sampling

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically in-depth interviews, to conduct a critical analysis of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media. Qualitative research is chosen for its capacity to delve deeply into the perspectives and experiences of participants, providing rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). In-depth interviews are particularly suited for this research as they allow for a nuanced exploration of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and understandings regarding news coverage in Sri Lankan print media.

Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with expertise and experience relevant to the field of media and journalism in Sri Lanka. A total of 20 participants were recruited, comprising journalists, editors, media analysts, and academics specializing in media studies. Purposive sampling ensures that participants possess the requisite knowledge and insights to provide meaningful contributions to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with the selected 20 participants. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered systematically (Bernard, 2018). An interview guide was developed to facilitate consistency across interviews while allowing for exploration of emergent themes. The guide covered topics such as participants' perceptions of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media, factors influencing media content, challenges faced by journalists, and potential areas for improvement.

Prior to conducting interviews, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board to ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and they were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or virtually, based on participants' preferences and logistical considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture. Field notes were taken during the interviews to supplement the audio recordings and provide additional context.

The data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following transcription,

the data were coded systematically to identify recurring themes and patterns related to news coverage in Sri Lankan print media. Codes were then organized into broader themes, allowing for the interpretation and synthesis of findings.

To enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, various strategies were employed. These included prolonged engagement with the data, member checking to validate interpretations with participants, and peer debriefing to solicit feedback from fellow researchers. Additionally, rich descriptions and direct quotations were used to support findings, enhancing the transparency and credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This methodology provides a comprehensive framework for conducting a critical analysis of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media, ensuring the validity and reliability of the study findings.

4. Results

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media, focusing on critical perspectives. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data. In this study, thematic analysis was employed to uncover recurring themes and patterns in the news coverage, providing insights into the representation and portrayal of various issues by the media.

4.1. Media Bias and Agenda Setting

The examination of Sri Lankan print media outlets uncovers a compelling narrative of media bias and agenda setting. This scrutiny exposes a discernible tilt towards particular political factions or ideologies within certain newspapers, impacting how news events are portrayed and which subjects are spotlighted. The analysis underscores the influential role media plays in shaping public opinion and discourse. Within the Sri Lankan media landscape, it becomes evident that certain newspapers wield their influence to advocate for specific political parties or ideologies. This bias permeates the framing of news stories, influencing the narrative presented to the audience. The selective portrayal of events can skew perceptions and reinforce existing political divides within society.

Moreover, the phenomenon of agenda setting emerges prominently. Media outlets exert their power to determine which issues receive significant coverage and which are relegated to the periphery. This strategic selection of topics not only reflects the editorial priorities of media organizations but also shapes the public agenda, influencing what issues gain traction within society. The implications of media bias and agenda setting are profound. By prioritizing certain topics over others, the media exercises considerable influence over public discourse. This can result in the amplification of specific viewpoints while marginalizing alternative perspectives, ultimately shaping the collective understanding of societal issues.

In essence, the findings underscore the pivotal role of the media in shaping public perception and discourse in Sri Lanka. The recognition of media bias and agenda setting prompts critical reflection on the role of journalism in a democratic society and raises questions about the integrity and impartiality of media outlets in fulfilling their responsibility to inform the public.

4.2. Framing of Conflict and Ethnic Issues

The portrayal of conflict and ethnic matters within Sri Lankan print media is a complex tapestry, characterized by varied framing strategies. A notable trend emerges wherein certain newspapers opt for a polarizing narrative, which not only intensifies ethnic tensions but also perpetuates entrenched stereotypes. This approach, while perhaps catering to certain readerships or agendas, contributes to the amplification of discord within society. Conversely, a subset of newspapers opts for a more nuanced portrayal, delving into the intricate layers of socio-political dynamics. Through in-depth analysis and contextualization, these publications aim to offer a deeper understanding of the underlying issues. This nuanced approach strives to present a more balanced perspective, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of conflicts and ethnic tensions.

However, even amidst the pursuit of nuance, instances of biases and stereotypes persist within the media landscape. Despite efforts to maintain impartiality, inherent societal prejudices and editorial biases seep into the reporting, underscoring the formidable challenge of achieving unbiased coverage in a society rife with divisions. The framing of conflict and ethnic issues within Sri Lankan print media thus reflects a dichotomy. On one hand, there exists a tendency towards polarization, fueled by sensationalism and perpetuation of stereotypes. On the other hand, efforts towards nuanced analysis seek to unravel the complexities of the situation. Yet, both approaches grapple with the inherent biases and challenges inherent in reporting on deeply entrenched societal divisions.

In navigating these complexities, the role of media in shaping perceptions and fostering understanding amidst conflict cannot be overstated. By striving for balanced and empathetic coverage, media outlets can play a pivotal role in promoting dialogue and reconciliation within a divided society.

4.3. Representation of Minorities and Marginalized Groups

The examination of media coverage also illuminates the portrayal of minorities and marginalized communities. Despite initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity and diversity, several newspapers were discovered to marginalize or stereotype minority groups in their reporting. This tendency not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also contributes to the marginalization of minority voices within mainstream narratives. Consequently, critical issues facing marginalized populations, including socio-economic disparities and human rights violations, often receive insufficient attention from the media. This deficiency underscores a failure in providing comprehensive coverage of pressing societal concerns.

Despite concerted efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within the media landscape, disparities persist in the representation of minorities and marginalized groups. Some newspapers, whether inadvertently or deliberately, continue to reinforce negative stereotypes or overlook the nuanced experiences of these communities. Consequently, the voices and perspectives of marginalized individuals are often sidelined, further perpetuating their marginalization within society.

Moreover, the media's limited focus on issues affecting marginalized groups highlights a broader failure in addressing systemic inequalities. By neglecting to give adequate coverage to topics such as socio-economic disparities and human rights violations, the media fails to fulfill its role as a watchdog and advocate for social justice. This lack of comprehensive coverage not only hinders public awareness but also perpetuates the invisibility of marginalized communities within mainstream discourse.

In conclusion, while strides have been made to promote inclusivity and diversity within the media, significant challenges remain in the representation of minorities and marginalized groups. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from media organizations to critically examine their reporting practices and ensure that they provide equitable representation to all members of society. Only through such efforts can the media fulfill its responsibility in fostering a more inclusive and just society.

4.4. Influence of Political Affiliations and Ownership Structures

The influence of political affiliations and ownership structures on media organizations has become a crucial determinant of news coverage. Within this landscape, newspapers intimately connected to political parties or influential figures often veer towards biased reporting, serving as mouthpieces for particular agendas rather than impartial sources of information. This alignment with political interests can distort the portrayal of events, favoring narratives that align with the owners' or backers' views while neglecting opposing perspectives. Consequently, the public's access to balanced information diminishes, hindering their ability to form well-rounded opinions.

Furthermore, the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a select few powerful conglomerates compounds these issues. When a handful of entities control the majority of media outlets, diversity of viewpoints inevitably suffers. This lack of diversity not only limits the range of voices represented but also fosters an environment where dissenting opinions are marginalized or silenced altogether. The fear of offending owners or advertisers can lead to self-censorship among journalists and editors, stifling the free exchange of ideas that is essential for a healthy democracy.

In such a landscape, the watchdog role traditionally ascribed to the media is compromised. Instead of holding power to account and serving as a check on government actions, media organizations may find themselves beholden to the interests of their owners or political allies. This blurring of lines between journalism and vested interests erodes public trust in the media and undermines its credibility as an impartial arbiter of truth. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to promote media pluralism and independence. Measures such as regulatory reforms to prevent excessive consolidation of media ownership, transparency initiatives to disclose potential conflicts of interest, and support for independent media outlets can help safeguard the integrity of journalistic practices and ensure that the public receives diverse, balanced, and accurate information. Only by fostering a media ecosystem that is truly free from undue influence can societies fulfill the democratic imperative of an informed citizenry.

4.5. Role of Journalistic Ethics and Professionalism

The role of journalistic ethics and professionalism in shaping news coverage is paramount, as underscored by a recent analysis. It elucidates a stark divide within the media landscape: while certain newspapers adhere steadfastly to ethical

reporting practices and impartiality, others succumb to the allure of sensationalism and clickbait tactics in pursuit of heightened readership. This dichotomy not only delineates varying journalistic approaches but also unveils the intricate interplay between journalistic integrity and commercial interests.

At the heart of this discussion lies the profound impact of journalistic ethics. These principles serve as the cornerstone of responsible journalism, guiding reporters and editors in their quest for truth and accuracy. Ethical reporting demands a commitment to fairness, objectivity, and transparency, thereby fostering trust between media outlets and their audiences. When adhered to rigorously, these standards elevate the quality of news coverage, empowering the public with reliable information essential for informed decision-making. Conversely, the prevalence of sensationalism and clickbait tactics represents a departure from these ethical imperatives. Driven by the pursuit of higher circulation and advertising revenue, some newspapers prioritize sensational headlines and exaggerated narratives over factual accuracy and contextual depth. This trend not only undermines the credibility of the media but also erodes public trust, relegating journalism to a mere tool for entertainment rather than a pillar of democracy.

In Sri Lanka, this tension between journalistic integrity and commercial interests is exacerbated by economic pressures prevalent within the media industry. With dwindling revenues and heightened competition, news organizations often find themselves compelled to compromise on journalistic standards in favor of profitability. This conundrum underscores the complex challenges facing the media landscape, necessitating a nuanced approach to balancing commercial viability with ethical imperatives.

In conclusion, the analysis sheds light on the indispensable role of journalistic ethics and professionalism in shaping news coverage. It serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring importance of upholding ethical standards in journalism, even amidst the pressures of commercialization. Only through a steadfast commitment to these principles can the media industry fulfill its crucial mandate of informing, educating, and empowering the public in Sri Lanka and beyond.

5. Discussion

The examination of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media reveals several critical insights that resonate with findings from existing literature while also shedding light on unique aspects of the media landscape in the context of Sri Lanka. This discussion synthesizes the results of the thematic analysis with relevant scholarly research, offering a comprehensive understanding of the implications and challenges surrounding news coverage in Sri Lanka.

The thematic analysis conducted highlights the pervasive presence of media bias and agenda setting within Sri Lankan print media. This observation is in line with existing research, such as Silva and Samarasinghe (2020), which emphasizes the influence of political affiliations and editorial priorities on news coverage. The selective portrayal of events by certain newspapers is indicative of a broader trend wherein media organizations advocate for specific political factions or ideologies, thereby molding public opinion and discourse, as noted by Gunaratne and Wattedgedera (2019). The implications of media bias and agenda setting are far-reaching. They have the potential to amplify certain viewpoints while marginalizing others, thus significantly shaping the collective understanding of societal issues. This resonates strongly with Ferdous and Khatun's 2020 study on news coverage of environmental issues, which underscores the crucial role of balanced and comprehensive coverage in fostering public awareness and engagement towards critical issues.

In Sri Lanka, where media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, the prevalence of bias and agenda setting poses significant challenges. It not only affects the credibility of journalistic practices but also has implications for democracy and governance. By influencing public perception, media bias can sway elections, perpetuate stereotypes, and hinder constructive dialogue on pressing issues. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach involving media literacy education, regulatory reforms, and fostering a culture of journalistic integrity. It's essential for media outlets to uphold ethical standards and strive for impartiality in their reporting. Moreover, promoting diversity in media ownership and providing platforms for marginalized voices can help mitigate the effects of bias and promote a more inclusive media landscape. Ultimately, a robust and independent media sector is crucial for upholding democratic values and ensuring informed public discourse in Sri Lanka.

The thematic analysis delves into the intricate portrayal of conflict and ethnic issues within the Sri Lankan print media landscape. In this discourse, certain newspapers choose narratives that exacerbate ethnic tensions, fostering polarization. Conversely, others adopt a more nuanced approach, recognizing the intricate layers of the socio-political milieu. This dichotomy underscores the complexities inherent in reporting on deeply rooted societal divisions and emphasizes the media's influence in shaping perspectives amid strife (Nabi, 2021). Despite endeavors toward nuanced

reporting, biases and stereotypes persist within the media sphere, underscoring the formidable task of attaining impartial coverage in a society marked by divisions. Nevertheless, through the pursuit of balanced and empathetic reporting, media platforms hold the potential to act as catalysts for dialogue and reconciliation within fractured communities.

The contrasting narratives in Sri Lankan print media reflect a broader global trend wherein media outlets grapple with the responsibility of presenting multifaceted issues in a balanced manner. In societies like Sri Lanka, scarred by historical grievances and ethnic tensions, the media's role becomes even more crucial. The portrayal of conflicts and ethnic dynamics can either perpetuate discord or pave the way for understanding and reconciliation. Acknowledging the complexity of the socio-political landscape is paramount for media practitioners. By transcending simplistic narratives and delving into the nuances of the issues at hand, journalists can contribute to the fostering of empathy and mutual understanding among divergent communities. In doing so, they become agents of change, steering society towards a path of dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

The analysis of media coverage highlights stark inequalities in the portrayal of minorities and marginalized groups in Sri Lankan print media. Despite endeavors to promote inclusivity and diversity, various newspapers persist in marginalizing or stereotyping minority communities in their reporting. This perpetuation of harmful stereotypes not only reinforces existing biases but also exacerbates the marginalization of minority voices in mainstream narratives (Fernando, 2019). To confront these issues, media organizations must undertake a concerted effort to scrutinize their reporting practices critically. By doing so, they can ensure fair and equitable representation for all segments of society. Achieving this goal demands a multifaceted approach. Firstly, media outlets need to acknowledge the impact of their coverage on shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards minority groups. They must recognize their role in either challenging or reinforcing societal prejudices. Secondly, there is a pressing need for newsrooms to diversify their staff, ensuring that journalists from minority backgrounds are involved in decision-making processes and reporting on issues that directly affect their communities. This not only enhances the authenticity and depth of reporting but also fosters greater empathy and understanding among readers.

Furthermore, media organizations should actively engage with minority communities to amplify their voices and narratives. By providing platforms for marginalized individuals to share their experiences and perspectives, newspapers can challenge stereotypes and broaden the scope of public discourse. Additionally, implementing sensitivity training programs for journalists can help cultivate a more nuanced and respectful approach to reporting on issues related to race, ethnicity, and identity. Ultimately, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and values. Therefore, it is incumbent upon media organizations to uphold their responsibility in fostering a more inclusive and just society. Only through introspection, collaboration, and a commitment to equitable representation can the media fulfill its potential as a catalyst for positive social change.

The impact of political affiliations and ownership configurations on media entities stands out as a pivotal factor shaping news portrayal in Sri Lanka. Newspapers closely linked with political factions or prominent individuals frequently incline towards partial reporting, jeopardizing the media's function as a watchdog and eroding public confidence in journalistic credibility (Nabi, 2023). Tackling these issues demands initiatives to bolster media diversity and autonomy, including regulatory adjustments to curb excessive concentration of media ownership and backing for autonomous media platforms. Cultivating a media landscape devoid of undue interference enables societies to preserve the democratic essence of an enlightened populace, wherein citizens are empowered with accurate and unbiased information to make informed decisions. Such endeavors not only fortify journalistic integrity but also reinforce the fundamental principles of democracy, fostering a society where the dissemination of information is free from vested interests, and the public interest takes precedence. The discourse underscores the vital significance of journalistic ethics and professionalism in molding news portrayal. Ethical reporting hinges on fairness, objectivity, and transparency, nurturing trust between media entities and their audience (Ferdous, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The critical analysis of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media unveils multifaceted insights into the dynamics of media representation, agenda setting, and ethical journalism within the socio-political context of the country. The thematic analysis underscores the pervasive influence of media bias and agenda setting, revealing a nuanced interplay between editorial priorities, political affiliations, and societal discourse. The findings underscore the profound impact of media coverage on public opinion formation and the imperative of upholding journalistic integrity in fostering informed citizenship. The examination of media bias and agenda setting within Sri Lankan print media elucidates the challenges posed by political affiliations and ownership structures on news portrayal. Newspapers aligned with specific political factions or influential figures often prioritize partisan narratives over impartial reporting, compromising the media's

role as a guardian of democracy. Addressing these challenges necessitates concerted efforts to promote media pluralism, transparency, and editorial independence, thereby safeguarding the integrity of journalistic practices and ensuring a diverse range of perspectives in public discourse.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals the complex portrayal of conflict, ethnic issues, and minority representation within Sri Lankan print media. While some newspapers perpetuate polarizing narratives and stereotypes, others strive for nuanced analysis and inclusive representation. Balancing these competing imperatives requires a commitment to ethical reporting practices, diversity in newsroom perspectives, and proactive engagement with marginalized communities. By amplifying marginalized voices and challenging entrenched narratives, media organizations can contribute to fostering empathy, understanding, and social cohesion in a divided society. Ultimately, the role of journalistic ethics and professionalism emerges as a cornerstone of responsible journalism, guiding reporters and editors in their quest for truth, accuracy, and public accountability. Upholding these principles is essential for preserving the credibility and trustworthiness of the media, particularly in the face of commercial pressures and political interference. By prioritizing ethical reporting standards and maintaining editorial independence, media organizations can fulfill their vital mandate of informing, educating, and empowering the public in Sri Lanka and beyond.

In conclusion, the critical analysis of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media underscores the intrinsic link between media representation, democratic governance, and societal cohesion. By interrogating prevailing narratives, challenging biases, and upholding ethical standards, media organizations can foster a more informed, inclusive, and democratic society, where the dissemination of information serves the public interest above all else.

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