

# SDJF Newsletter

## Growing New Media Culture and Digital Journalism in Sri Lanka

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New innovative developments in internet and related technologies in the digital field has contributed in developing new opportunities in the low-income countries like Sri Lanka. As a result, Sri Lanka make an effort to adapt to new technologies to increase digital opportunities through internet. Social media in the internet has taken the digital platform by storm creating new trends in news and information sharing and creating social networks. Overwhelming number of digital content are made everyday in social media platforms creating opportunities and promoting networking.



Unlike traditional media, online news media and social media create a dynamic atmosphere in online news delivery making reciprocity in news sharing a new trend. Social media are very dynamic in terms of producing timely and interactive communication and promoting dialogue and content exchange among consumers and content creators. The most of the social media content in Sri Lanka today are stipulated by the news worthy items and social media are conferred by news. Even though the use of social media is growing and digital identities are created among the youth, the irregular access to technology and lack of proper infrastructure limit the use of social media and digitalization of the everyday work of the general public.

*“Social media is reducing social barriers. It connects people on the strength of human values, not identities.”*

*~ Narendra Modi*

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In Sri Lanka, there is a rapid development of digital technologies in the urban areas. The local business and everyday uses of new media are more attuned to using digital media and technologies to go about their businesses and make an impact not only in the urban milieu but also in the rural areas. Even though Sri Lanka is a developing country the rapid growth in new media has impacted the way of life of many in Sri Lanka. The new media culture in Sri Lanka has evolved into many separate areas of engagement as language, culture and religion have created separation in digital media platforms. The pluralism and diversity in the Sri Lankan community have created the digital divide by its diverse language, culture and religion.

The new media which is equivalent to social media in the country are more inclined to become worthy of news stories than mere networking platforms. [Social media has transformed into digital journalism platforms and online news are shared in social media. This trend has become more prevalent during the COVID-19 Pandemic, as more youth as well as general public have been seeking information on the pandemic and related topics on social media.](#)

Social media not only create its content based on news, there is also more inclination to share information. More users are enthusiastic to know information through social media as it is accessible on the phone. In Sri Lanka this has been the trend and new media has become a platform where information is disseminated and digital journalism thrive.

## Multi-ethnic friendships flourish among University Students as SDJF promotes Pluralism and Diversity

“We gather where love is” was one of the most touching sayings by many participants during the 6<sup>th</sup> inter-district, inter-university exchange program organized by Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) as a part of the InSPIRE project. Fourteen Young undergraduates from University of Peradeniya accompanied by Dr. J.M.P.N. Anuradha Lecturer, Department of Agricultural Extension visited Jaffna to learn and experience the culture of Hindu. In the morning of the day, they met with the eleven undergraduate students from University of Jaffna for the first time and got the opportunity to participate in a field trip together showing how strongly bonded they can become even though they live their lives miles apart.



Jaffna city tour started in the early morning of the day, showcasing and to promoting inter cultural learning and communication among the participants. The team visited, the Nallur Kovil, Naga Viharaya, Dambakolapatuna, Jaffna Fort and Jaffna Library. “This tour was a novel experience. It was my first time to visit Dambakolapatuna and Buddhist temples in Jaffna. There was no language barrier in communicating with each other. We sang songs of both Tamil and Sinhala languages and danced. The staff that came with Peradeniya students



were very kind and very good. They freely moved with us making it comfortable for us to interact,” said Pradeep Raj, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year student from University of Jaffna.



## Helvetas Sri Lanka and SDJF launch the Findings of the National Research on New Media Culture in Sri Lanka

Followed by a national research conducted through Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPID) by Helvetas Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) on the “Freedom of Expression and New Media Culture in Sri Lanka”, the findings of the research were launched at a Press Conference held on 30th June, 2022 at Radisson Hotel, Colombo. This research was conducted by IPID between July 2021- December 2021 and the social media trends it reflected and the findings were based on the trends prevalent during this period of time.



The overall objective of this research is to obtain a comprehensive understanding on the use of new media, and its landscape (culture) for promoting freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. In assessing the landscape of new media in Sri Lanka, the research gained a deeper understanding as to the key actors and stakeholders, the main consumers of new media outlets, user-behavior patterns, and the overall ecology of the freedom of expression in new media in Sri Lanka.

This research is carried out as a part of Incubator Spaces for Promoting Information Rights and Freedom of Expression (InSPIRE) project implemented by SDJF in partnership with Helvetas Sri Lanka and

funded by European Union.

According to the research, the role of new media in creating digital identities among users, mainly youth, in Sri Lanka is impressive. To further strengthen this trend, the campaigns in advancing citizen journalism in the digital sphere; encouraging online websites to accommodate more blogs and opinion pieces from citizens; enabling more digital spaces for citizens to network, share ideas and freely express themselves are encouraged. This will expand and foster a progressive and interactive environment for users to sharpen their digital identities in Sri Lanka. These are some of the key findings of the comprehensive national research.

Findings of the research further reveals that a considerable majority of those in 15 to 29 age group (78.7%) can be considered as active users of Internet as they indicate daily usage. This demonstrates a high engagement of the Internet and new media outlets by the youth which signifies an active digital presence of Internet users in the country. Reinforcing the idea of creating digital identities, majority (55.6%) from the 15–29-year age group indicated that they use internet to access social media platforms. Of the social media platforms used in Sri Lanka, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube were used the most. The youth reported of using a wide range of social media platforms namely: Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Viber.



When presented with specific scenarios on how they would report certain issues such as incidents of corruption, gender-based violence or harassment – a high majority of respondents indicated that they would opt to not do anything. These results demonstrate a strong sense of reluctance among youth to express their beliefs and opinions on social media which indicates that there is a prevalent fear among online users in Sri Lanka on their safety when expressing opinions of this nature. However, since March 2022, the new media landscape has changed in terms of expressing issues like corruption online. To reveal corruption and raise their voice on such issues, youth now opt to use social media. For more information and to read the report, please log in to [www.ldjf.org](http://www.ldjf.org)

# Multi-ethnic friendships flourish among University Students as SDJF promotes Pluralism and Diversity

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“Before I participated in this program, I thought it would be hard to communicate with my Tamil speaking friends. But it was amazing how we communicated our feelings and thoughts even without speaking the same language. Language was not a barrier for us, as we all were thinking of sharing and caring”, said Thisumi Weerasinghe, from Department of Agriculture Extension, University of Peradeniya. This was the sentiment of many students from University of Peradeniya. They were amazed to see how friendly and welcoming the Hindu students are and how ready they were to start a bond that will last a lifetime.



D. Mohanraj, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Media student from University of Jaffna said, “I was surprised and overwhelmed when I saw the sisters from University of Peradeniya came to the hall with pottu on their foreheads. This is created a great bond in such an act. It is a way of showing respect to the others culture and promote pluralism in the country.” This witnessing of the openness and the readiness of the students of University of Peradeniya shows how powerful is the impact that a small change in behaviour and attitude can be. Mohanraj witnessing the students in “pottu” (a traditional symbolic mark in the forehead in a small circle shape made out of saffron/sandalwood of majority of Hindu’s in Jaffna and elsewhere), made a

marked difference in how he perceive Peradeniya students. This is the change that SDJF seeks. A change in perception and attitude that reflects in behaviour.

The purpose of the inter-university/district exchange activity is to promote pluralism and diversity while developing a meaningful network among the future journalists in different universities. The InSPIRE project aspires to create and activate an innovative, socially responsible network of 350 future journalists and media professionals by empowering them in many ways to be active in the digital media sphere while being sensitive to the various important issues in the Sri Lankan society.

The 3-year Incubator Spaces for Promoting Information Rights and Freedom of Expression (InSPIRE) Project is implemented by the Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum and Helvetas Sri Lanka and funded by European Union.





# Helvetas Sri Lanka and SDJF launch the Findings of the National Research on New Media Culture in Sri Lanka

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## Recommendations of the Research

Various improvements in new media avenues for community and grassroots voices to reach district and policy levels are recommended. These include: 1. Educating the public on the range of new media platforms available to them to express themselves in socially responsible manner; 2. Improving media literacy at the community level to increase social change; and 3. Adapting university curricula to include new media technologies to equip emerging young generation with the knowledge and skills on new media and freedom of expression.

*In order for these recommendations to take effect, relevant authorities and officials need to ensure the provisions in existing legislation promoting freedom of expression are effectively implemented; amending draconian laws that prevent freedom of expression and information rights in online and offline spaces; combat political bias by Media entities; making public aware about their rights and responsibilities in expressing themselves in new media; improve the interaction of media watchdog groups on accountability of various groups i.e. politicians, government representatives and other stakeholders, need to be addressed.*



## Mentoring students from University of Jaffna at the InSPIRE Idea Market

The 3rd Idea Market was organized by SDJF for 40 (M - 13 / F - 27 ) students from University of Jaffna on 26th June 2022 in Jaffna. The mentors Mr. S. Vimalrajn and Mr. N. Puvikaran on Short Films, Mr. A.M. Aswer on Mobile Video Storytelling, and Mr. Isbahan Sharfdeen on Digital Drama guided the InSPIRE students to shape their stories suitable to develop respective media products for the Inter-University Competition. Mr. S. Vimalrajn , a renowned filmmaker, said “Students were very keen on learning the techniques to develop their storyline overcoming difficulties in shortening scenes”.

The students pitched ideas on stories that reflected economic problems and many social issues in Sri Lanka. Among them the economic crisis at present and the livelihood issues stemming from the crisis, regional issues such as the water scarcity in Jaffna, transport problem, land rights in Upcountry Tamils, Fisheries issues in Jaffna, Alopecia Areata disease, disaster management issues in Batticaloa, Upcountry youth, infrastructure problems in Upcountry, etc., Women headed households, sexual bribery, child labour, gender inequality and other gender related issues, LGBTQI issues are some of the issues brought into spotlight by the students. The mentoring session was really stimulating as they actively took part in getting guidance from the mentors from each media category.



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