

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION FEBRUARY 2018

First Assessment report of media coverage of the Local Government Election 2018

Introduction

The aim of this assessment is to ascertain the conduct of the media in relation to election coverage and whether media guidelines as set out by the Elections Commission are being adhered to. The evaluation also examines how news coverage influences the decision-making process of the citizens. It is hoped that the report will create a dialogue between the evaluators and the public, and lead to an active democratic society and a professional media industry.

As such, the assessment evaluated the following: (a). in ensuring the voter makes an informed decision, is the news factual, impartial and balanced, (b) is the space and time provided for discussions and debate adequate, (c) have media guidelines set out by the Elections Commission been adhered to, (d) has the media industry abided by internationally accepted standards and ethics.

Methodology

The methodology followed is a detailed content analysis of the data obtained from the media. The Measurement indicators for data used is as follows: Time allocated as per minutes and seconds for TV new and discussions/debates. Space apportioned in print media as square centimetres. Therefore, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data was analysed to ensure media follows the guidelines given by the Elections Commission and that it adheres to internationally accepted professional standards.

Data collected for this report is for the period January 20 -22, which is two days prior to the casting of postal votes. The following 6 TV channels were monitored during the main Sinhala news cast - *SLRC, ITN, Sirasa, Swarnawahini, Derana, Hiru*. In addition to this, news that appeared in the print media was also analyzed on the same dates in the following newspapers: *Lankadeepa, Irida Lankadeepa Divaina, Divaina Irida Journal, Lakkima, Lakkima Irida Journal, Mawbima, Mawbima Irida, Janayugaya, Janayugaya Irida, Deshaya, Ravaya, Lanka Irida Journal Dinamina, Silumina, Rasa, Ada, and Aththa* totalling 20 newspapers. The evaluation was conducted to identify how much space newspapers allow on their front page and continuing pages for news involving various political parties. The TV channels were evaluated for the same purpose.

A total of 8 hours and 12 minutes was spent watching the chosen TV channels on January 20, 21 and 22 for this research. During this same period, 44,320 square centimeters in 20 newspapers were examined. A more detailed account is given below.

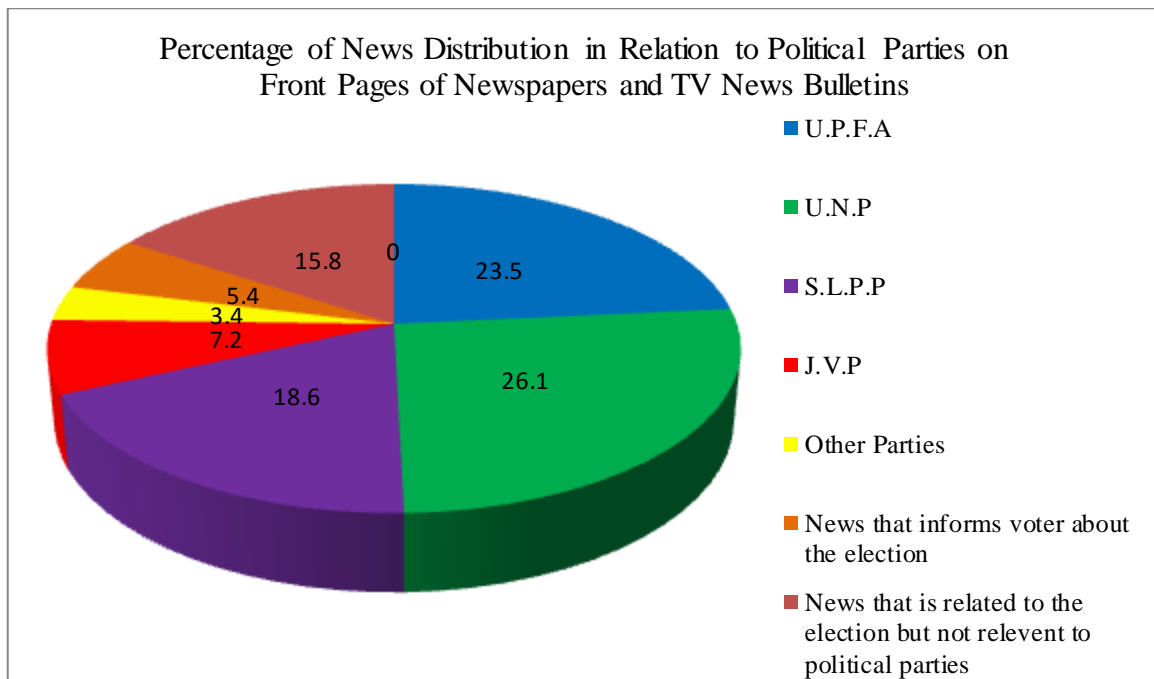
I. News Content – Television and Print Media

Distribution of news content for the various political parties on the front page of newspapers and in the main news bulletin of TV Channels (See chart 1, Annex I).

QUANTITATIVE EXAMINATION OF POLITICAL PARTY REPRESENTATION IN DAILY NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION CHANNELS

All news contained in print media and TV channels	All news	News unrelated to the election	News related to the election		Representation of individual political parties				News that informs the voter about the election		News that is related to the election but not relevant to political parties
			Direct	Indirect	SLFP	UNP	SLPP	JVP	Other parties		
News appearing on page 1 of newspapers examined	206	71	39	96	21	37	26	5	3	13	30
News contained in main newscasts of TV channels that were observed	279	65									
Total	485	136	225	124	82	91	65	25	12	19	55

Chart No.1



(Diagram 1)

Distribution of news content for the various political parties on the front page of newspapers and in the main news bulletin of TV Channels, given as a percentage (See Diagram 1).

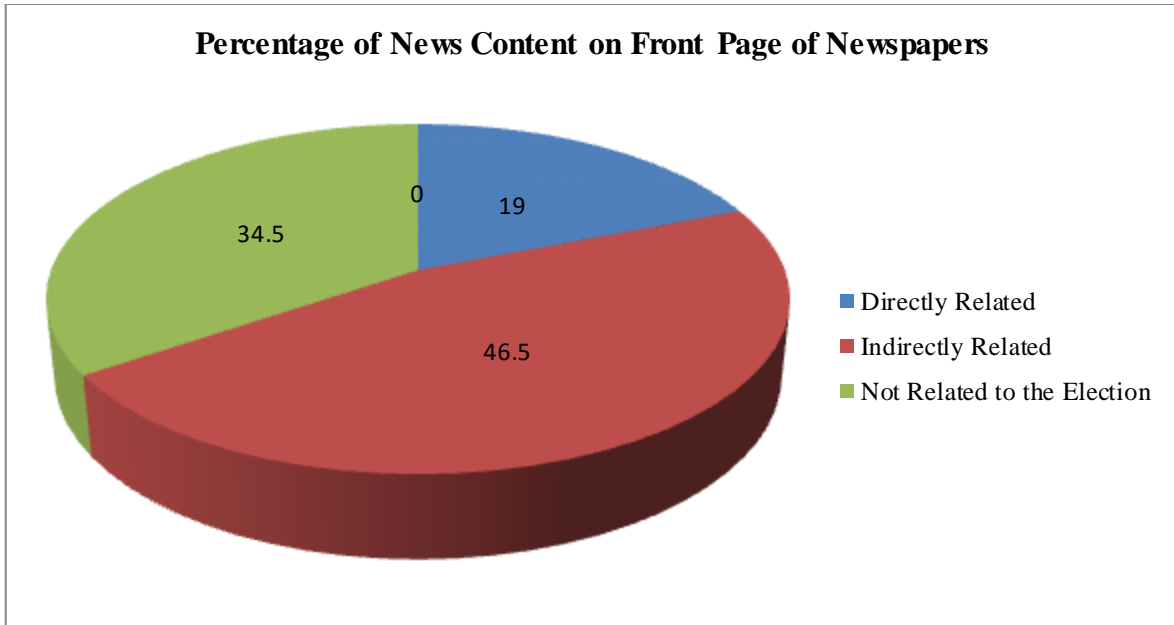
II. News Content - Daily and Weekend Newspapers

A total of 206 news items, appearing in Newspapers on the front page and continued inside were evaluated during the period mentioned. Of those, 71 news items were unrelated to the election. Thirty-nine (39) were directly related and ninety six (96) were indirectly related. The chart (see chart II), shows the breakdown of the news items in relation to the political parties.

Newspaper	All News	News Non Related to the Election	Election Related News													News that informs the voter about the Election
			Direct	Indirect	U.P.F.A		U.N.P		S.L.P.P		J.V.P		Other Parties			
					Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative		
Lankadeepa Daily	18	10	4	4		2		1		3						1
Lankadeepa Sunday	10	2	1	7			1	1	1					1		1
Divayina	19	6	3	10	1		3		2	2						1
Divayina Sunday	8		1	7				5	1							1
Lakbima	5	2	1	2	1		1			2						
Lakbima Sunday	13	7	3	3		1		1	1						1	2
Rivra Sunday	8		4	4	1	2		1	2			1				
Rivira	7	1	3	3				2	1							2
Mawbima Sunday	9	2	1	6	1		2	2	1	1	1	1			1	
Mawbima	10	5	3	2	1	1		1	1		1					
Janayugaya Sunday	8	2		6		2	1	1								
Janayugaya	9	7	1	1		1										1
Deshaya	8		2	6	3		3	3	2							
Raway a	7	1		6						2						
Lanka	7	1		6		3		4								
Eththa	10	5	2	3				3								
Dinamina	23	8	6	9	2	2	2			3						2
Silumina	11	7	1	3												1
Resa	8	3		5						2						
Ada	8	2	3	3		1					1					1
Amount	206	71	39	96	10	11	12	25	14	12	3	2	1	2		13

(Chart II)

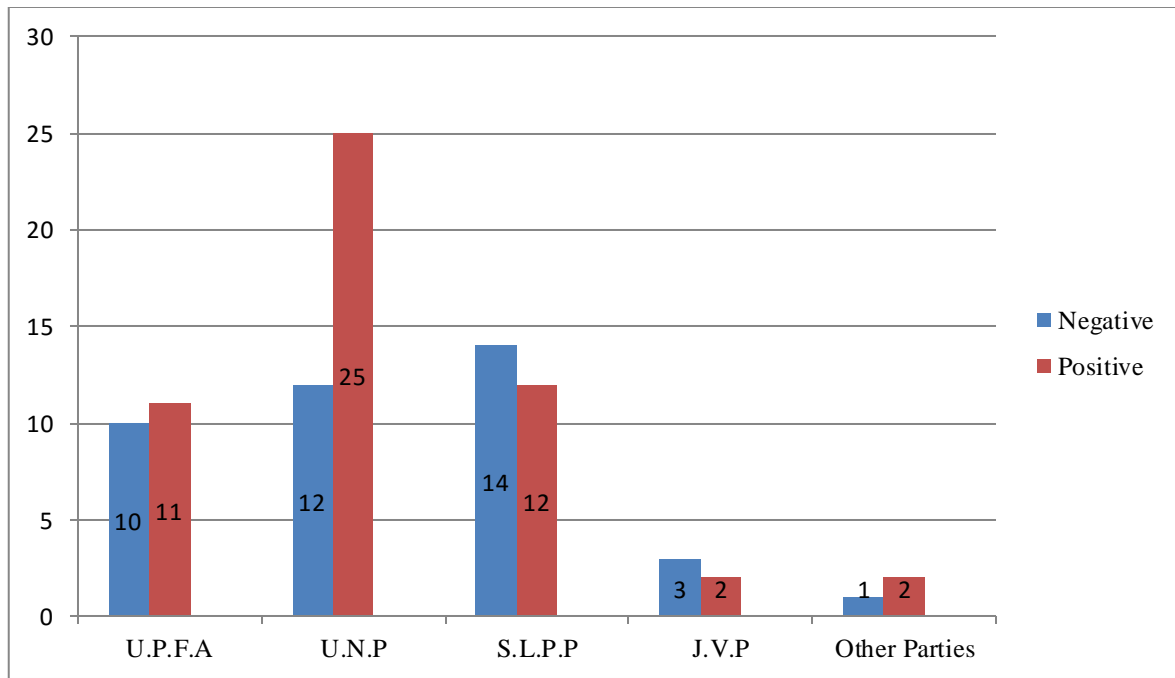
The diagram (II) contained in Annex IV indicates the distribution of news content on the front pages of the 20 newspapers examined and the breakdown of whether they were directly election related or not or if they were unrelated news items. The evaluation revealed that 65.5 had been allocated for election related news in the run –up to the postal vote.



(Diagram II)

In analysing the content of the front pages of the newspapers, it is clear that while some newspapers displayed impartiality, some promoted a political party, while others reported news that is harmful to a party.

Examined from a quantitative view point, it would seem that political parties were well represented in the newspapers. Though equal space had been allotted, a critical look revealed that it was space used to negatively impact of the political party discussed in the story (See chart III).



(Chart III)

Number of news items indicating content on the front page that portrays a political party in a favourable or unfavourable manner (Chart IV).

III. News content - Main nightly news cast on Television

A total of 279 news items were watched during the given time frame. Of these 65 items were not related to the election. Two hundred and fourteen (214) news items were either directly or indirectly involved.

Channel	Total News Items	News Non Related to the Election	Election Related /Direct-Indirect	U.P.FA	U.N.P	S.L.P.P	J.V.P	Other News	News that informs the voter about the election
SLRC	69	10	59	17	16	12	6		1
ITN									
Sirasa	31	3	28	10	4	4	4	9	
Swarnavahini	47	26	21	4	10	5	1		1
Derana	38	6	32	6	7	9	2		
Hiru	38	10	28	7	4	6	3		1
Amount	279	65	214	65	61	39	20	9	6

(Chart IV)

Diagram IV, Annex VII shows the distribution of the news items in relation to the political parties.

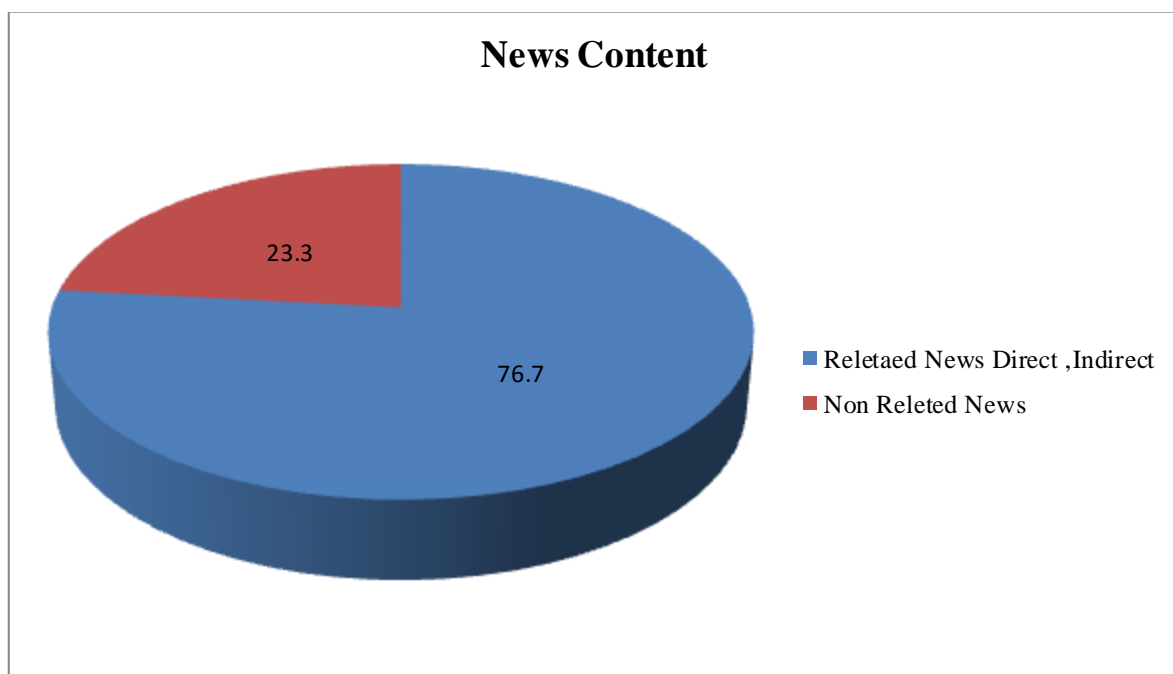


Diagram IV, Annex VII

Diagram V, Annex VIII indicates the percentage of the distribution of the news on the 6 Television channels. The diagram indicates that television channels concentrated more time on direct or indirect election related news.

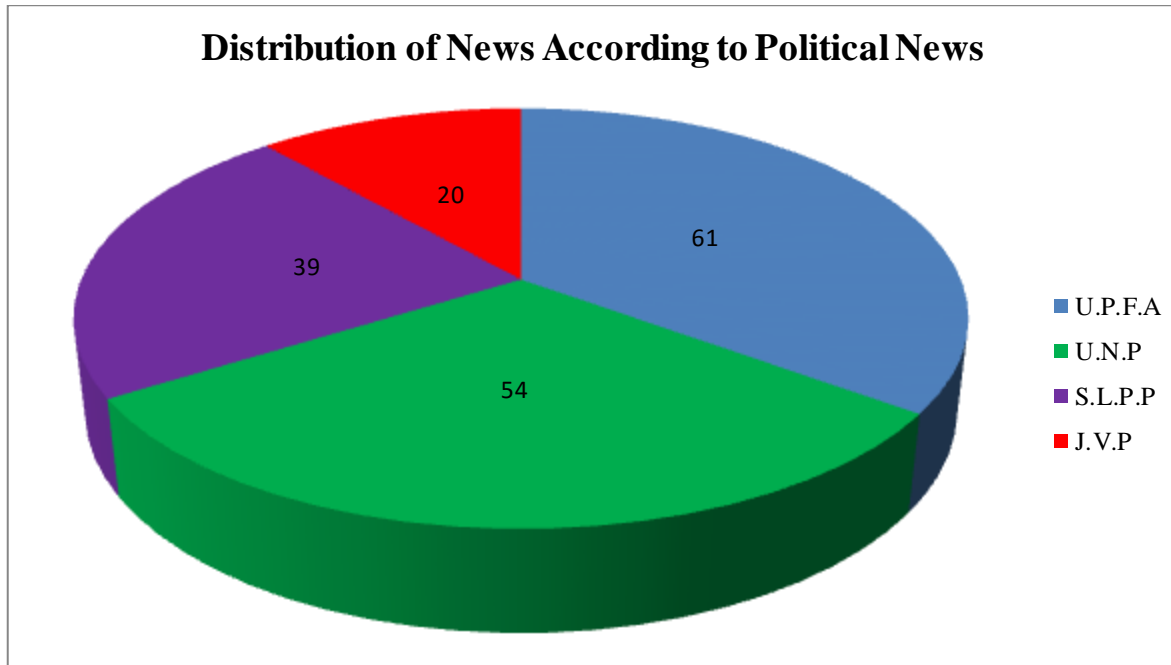


Diagram V, Annex VIII

Chart VI, Annex IX shows representation of political parties in the main nightly news telecasts on Television, where more time was spent on some political parties and others received comparatively less time.

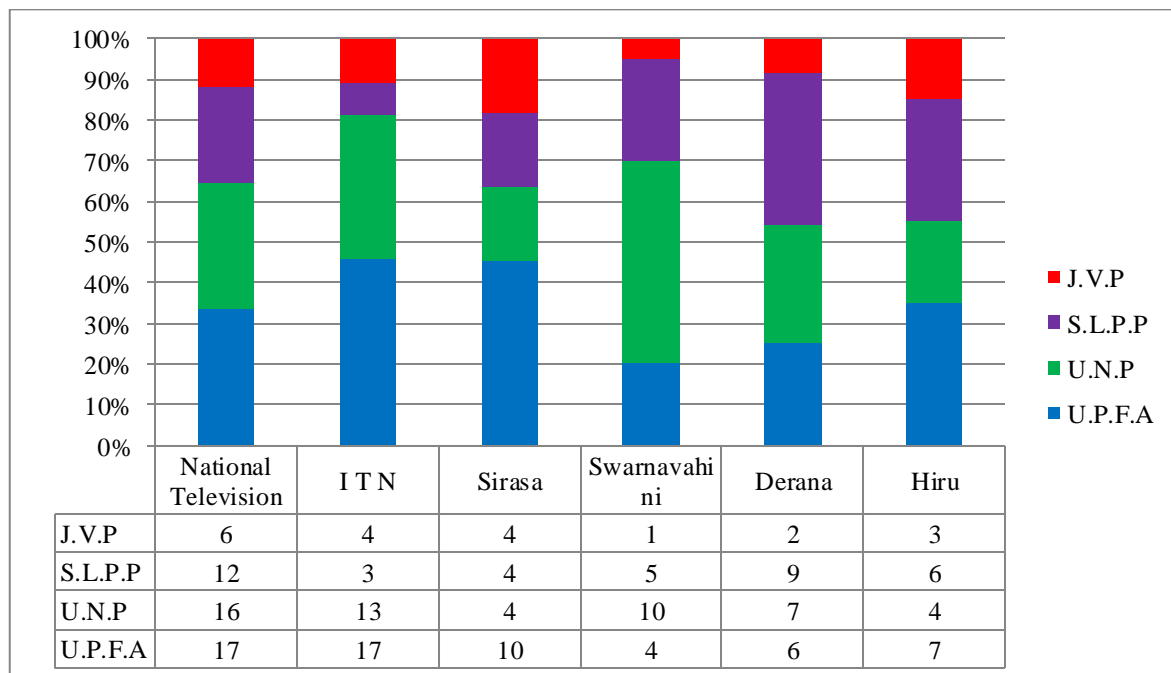


Chart VI, Annex IX

Allocation of time on Television varied from channel to channel as the diagram indicates. Some television channels gave more space to news items of political parties they favoured, thereby displaying partiality.

General observations on the application of election guidelines and media

What comes to light in evaluating the conduct of the aforementioned television channels and newspapers is that, despite a special gazette notification, dated **December 4, 2017, # 2048/1** from the Elections Commission outlining media guidelines, neither the newspapers nor television channels had made a serious attempt to abide by them.

- (1) The second guideline states, "**All media must act in a manner that will not harm or give undue advantage to a party or contestant**". The evaluation indicates that neither the TV channels nor newspapers have abided by the guideline, which indicates that they have not been able to move away from their established ideology. While projecting the notion that political parties and contestants receive equal time and space, they have employed tactics that portray some political parties and/contestants in a positive or negative manner. (See end notes 01 for TV and end note 02 for print media).
- (2) "**Providing an opportunity for the other side/person to respond if affected by an incident and reported in the media**", (guideline 6). Observations indicate that this provision has been ignored and/or violated (See end note 3).
- (3) "**During an election, if the President, Prime Minister or a Minister makes a statement to the media, that is to be considered as time/space provided to the particular political party that person belongs to**". In such a case a leader/member of the opposing parties too must receive a similar opportunity. However, this guideline (#10) too has been violated (See end note 4).
- (4) Guideline (22) states that "**every media institution must refrain from causing intolerance and hatred amongst Sri Lankans by highlighting issues on religion, ethnicity, character, language caste etc.** " However, evaluators encountered indirect reports that involved negative portrayal of religious, ethnic, language and caste (end note 5).

- (5) This election is being conducted under the mixed system of first –past-the-post and proportional representation. However, there has been little effort by the media industry to educate the voter on this system. In the evaluation it was seen that though some effort to educate the voter has been made in the print media, Television channels have given the subject very little prominence (See end note 6).
- (6) For the first time it has been mandated that nomination lists and Councils must reflect the 25 compositions of women to ensure fair representation of gender equality. While government run television, stations have covered election meetings of women candidates, the evaluation found that the time allocated for women on the news bulletin was far from satisfactory (See end note 7).
- (7) Guideline #27 states that media ethics must be followed when covering elections. However, it was seen that neither the print media nor the television channels abided by those. Content analysis of the data evaluators worked with reveals that those sources were not included in some stories. In some instances where reports could lead to debates, by-lines were missing. In other cases, the reports were more about the political issues or discussing the character of the contestant (see footnote 8).

End notes:

1. Refer chart # 6. Apart from the data presented, it was clear during the evaluations that a private channel picked news items that presented the Prime Minister in a negative manner. On the other hand, the government-controlled Television stations chose uncomplimentary photos and voice cuts of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa.
2. See Chart 3.
3. The “*Aththa*” newspaper of January 22 carried a report headlined “Rosy faces hidden threat from within party ” which referred directly to the UNP Colombo Mayoral candidate Rosy Senanayake. However, the news item did not include her version.
4. Diagram 3 indicates that of the 214 election related news items, 126 were about either the *Sri Lanka Freedom Party* or the *United National Party*. The *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* and the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* were

not featured as much. When evaluators sought clarification, the explanation given was that the President and Prime Minister are given more publicity.

5. During the three days of this evaluation, the prime story on television and print media was about a school principal who had to kneel in the presence of the Uva Chief Minister. Many news items were reported in a manner that highlighted nationality (The *Divayina* newspaper in its report of the incident and stories connected to it on January 22, highlighted nationality, while *Lakbima* and *Ada*, in some instances, downplayed nationality).
6. Diagram 2 relates to print media coverage while diagram 3 deals with television coverages. News reports seeking to *educate* are 13 news items and 6 items respectively.
7. During the January 22 news telecast on *Rupavahini*, it was mentioned that there would be a special feature showcasing women nominees. It was clear during the period of evaluation, that other TV channels made no effort to feature women and share their views. For example, on January 22, in the show titled 'Political talk' (*Deshapalana katha*) on ITN, there were no women.
8. On January 21, the *Silumina* paper reported that the Sugar Corporation had made a clear profit. While this news item has an indirect connection to the election, and the story was sourced to Industries and Commerce Minister Rishard Bathuideen, the story had no by-line. On January 21, the *Irida Divaina* Journal reported that the President had been advised to seek an extension of his term by a UNP Minister. This story had no source. The story is indirectly relevant to the election.