

Journalists around the globe are producing high-quality investigative stories that make a difference. Their experiences offer lessons as well as inspiration.

Journalists in Sri Lanka face growing government control

BY SONALI SAMARASINGHE



The most challenging aspect of investigative journalism is the physical danger.

On Jan. 8, 2009, eight assassins on four black motorcycles surrounded the vehicle of my husband, Sri Lankan journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge. They bludgeoned him to death on a busy street in Colombo's High Security Zone, just yards away from one of the nation's largest Air Force bases. For details, see my post for the Nieman Report at <http://ow.ly/2RFpk>.

Wickrematunge was killed for his work. In 1994, he was founding editor of *The Sunday Leader*, which pioneered a vibrant brand of public service journalism and investigative reporting that captured the imagination of readers and catapulted his newspaper to cult-like status.

Four years after the newspaper was founded, I joined the staff as its main investigative reporter. I was a defense lawyer for six years before I became an investigative journalist, a craft I practiced for 11 years until I fled the country after my husband's murder.

The practice of criminal law is rich and eventful, but investigative journalism stands in a class by itself in Sri Lanka.

There are several privately owned media outlets that remain as independent as possible under trying circumstances, focusing on exposing corruption and government excess. In recent years, many private media organizations have been bought by individuals close to President Mahinda Rajapakse and his political family. Some other outlets are owned by people who either have chosen to associate themselves with the ruling regime and engage in lucrative business with government, or hold official positions.

The state-controlled media include the nation's largest newspaper group, two major television channels and a radio station. They are run by politically appointed chairpersons and editors, who owe their jobs and considerable perks to the government. Any attempt by a journalist or editor to demonstrate independence or balanced reporting is rewarded with dismissal, transfer or physical harm.

For instance, on Dec. 27, 2007, a powerful government minister stormed into the state-run Rupavahini Television Station and manhandled its news director, who had aired a speech that praised a political opponent. For the first time in the recent history of the state media, employees of the station rose up against the minister in protest.

No doubt, they were emboldened by a series of investigative articles in our newspaper about the minister and his son, which eventually led to the son's arrest. The series, "Gangsterism and Sri Lanka's Faulty Legal System," won the Global Shining Light Award in 2008. (www.gjjc2008.no/news/336)

Unlike many other media companies, Wickrematunge's newspaper was markedly different, focusing on high-impact journalism. It maintained a modest office and a small editorial staff that multi-tasked to publish the weekly paper. Many weeks, I wrote between 7,000 and 10,000 words, often more.

Government restrictions

One of the more challenging aspects for investigative journalism is the lack of information. Sri Lanka does not have a Freedom of Information Act, and speaking to journalists is actively discouraged. The "Establishments Code" prohibits public officials from disclosing information to the media. This has led to jumpy officials unwilling to confirm or deny information already in the hands of journalists, or even provide statistical information.

Investigative journalism becomes an undercover operation. Documents and information change hands at unlikely places and in surprising situations.

The most challenging aspect of investigative journalism is the physical danger. Sri Lanka's constitution provides for freedom of expression but the right is infringed upon via other laws. Emergency regulations, along with the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the Public Security Ordinance and other laws, give the government and armed forces wide powers to arrest without warrant. You can be detained without charge for up to three months. Officials are shielded from prosecution, provided they acted "in good faith."

The Official Secrets Act prohibits publication of any information the government deems secret and is just another piece of legislation that hangs like a sword of Damocles over the news media.

The Press Council Act of 1973 bans reporting on certain fiscal, defense and security information. It imposes fines and prison terms for publication of internal government communications or cabinet decisions, such as basic economic issues that may have an impact on price hikes or food shortages. (<http://ow.ly/32Akq>)