



The Organizational Apparatus of ‘Niyamuwa’ and ‘Ravaya’ Newspapers in Representing Anti and Non-Establishment Political Sentiments in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka's political trajectory since independence has been defined by quasi democratic practices leading to political violence, authoritarianism, and deep structural conflicts, which also created an adverse environment for media freedom. Despite operating under emergency rule, censorship, and waves of political repression, a tradition of anti- and non-establishment journalism has persisted. This article examines two prominent cases: Niyamuwa, a newspaper associated with the Marxist Peoples Liberation Front (JVP), and Ravaya, an independent critical weekly that emerged as a platform for dissenting voices of civil society. Through ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and interviews with journalists, activists, and readers, the study explores the organizational apparatus that enabled these newspapers to survive amidst political turmoil. The findings reveal that the durability of Sri Lanka's alternative press lies in its ability to cultivate organizational resilience, ideological clarity, and participatory editorial practices. Beyond mere survival, these papers played crucial roles in fostering counter-hegemonic discourse, mobilizing marginalized communities, and countering political apathy. The article situates the Sri Lankan experience within broader debates on the alternative press in the Global South, contributing to comparative media scholarship and discussions on the democratic potential of dissenting journalism.

Key Words: Anti and Non Establishment media, marginalized communities, Political apathy, repression, organizational resilience

Introduction

The press occupies a paradoxical space in societies undergoing political conflict. On the one hand, it can reproduce hegemonic narratives aligned with state or market power; on the other, it can serve as a tool of resistance, opening spaces for counter-discourse and democratic participation (Waisbord, 2013). In Sri Lanka, this paradox is sharply felt. Since independence in 1948, the island has experienced cycles of authoritarian governance, insurgency, and

civil war. During much of this period, mainstream media organizations were either directly state-controlled or structurally dependent on the political establishment. Yet alongside them, a tradition of anti- and non-establishment newspapers emerged—fragile, often short-lived, but symbolically and politically significant.

This article focuses on two of the most influential cases: Niyamuwa of the Marxist Peoples Liberation Front, and Ravaya, a non-establishment Tabloid newspaper. Both newspapers provided spaces for critical engagement, dissenting voices, and democratic reflection during periods of intense repression. While Niyamuwa emerged in the 1980s as a Marxist oriented newspaper associated with militancy, Ravaya, founded by Victor Ivan, built its reputation as an independent platform for alternative political critique. Their trajectories illuminate broader questions about organizational survival, political positioning, and the transformative potential of journalism outside the mainstream.

The research seeks to address the following questions: How did these newspapers construct their organizational apparatus in a hostile political environment? What ideological frameworks and editorial practices sustained their relevance? How did their work contribute to reducing political apathy and deepening democratic discourse in Sri Lanka? Finally, how do these cases compare to traditions of alternative journalism across the Global South?

Literature Review

Scholarship on alternative media has consistently emphasized its role as a counter-hegemonic force in societies dominated by state-aligned or market-driven press systems. Atton (2002) describes alternative media as a form of “radical communication” that challenges dominant ideologies by enabling marginalized voices to participate in public discourse. Downing (2001) further conceptualizes “radical media” as inherently tied to social movements, not simply as journalistic ventures but as political projects embedded within struggles for justice. These foundational perspectives underscore that the significance of alternative press lies less in circulation numbers than in its symbolic and mobilizing potential.

In the Global South, scholars highlight how authoritarian structures have shaped media practices, producing paradoxical outcomes of both repression and resilience. Waisbord (2013) notes that in contexts of weak democratic institutions, alternative journalism often reinvents professionalism by emphasizing advocacy, solidarity, and participatory practices over conventional notions of “objectivity.” Waisbord and Mellado (2014) argue for “de-westernizing communication studies” by paying attention to the innovative ways non-Western media adapt to authoritarian and transitional political environments. Case studies from Latin America, for instance, demonstrate how community radio and underground press networks provided critical infrastructure for resistance against military dictatorships (Krohling Peruzzo, 1998). Similar dynamics were observed in South Africa, where underground newspapers sustained anti-apartheid movements despite systemic repression (Switzer & Adhikari, 2000).

In the South Asian context, Rodan (1996) and George (2012) emphasize that authoritarian regimes like Singapore maintain dominance not only through overt censorship but also by cultivating opposition weakness. This insight resonates strongly with Sri Lanka, where mainstream newspapers historically aligned themselves with ruling parties, leaving limited space for dissenting journalism (Perera, 2016). Within this restrictive environment, alternative newspapers such as *Niyamuwa* and *Ravaya* reflect two distinct models of anti- and non-establishment press. Their survival mirrors findings in comparative literature that organizational resilience, solidarity-based funding, and ideological clarity are critical to sustaining alternative journalism in repressive contexts (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001).

Specifically, studies of Sri Lankan journalism reveal a long tradition of political engagement by the press, stretching back to colonial resistance newspapers in the 19th century (Wickramasinghe, 2014). However, the post-1977 liberalization era intensified the challenges facing alternative journalism. As Mendis (2002) shows in a comparative study of Sri Lanka and Singapore, structural violence, emergency rule, and market dependency often silenced dissenting media. Yet, paradoxically, this environment also produced fertile ground for oppositional voices. *Niyamuwa*, tied to the JVP's Marxist project, exemplifies what Downing (2001) calls "movement media," where journalism functions as part of a revolutionary apparatus. In contrast, *Ravaya*, founded by Victor Ivan, embodies what Waisbord (2013) terms "reinvented professionalism," where independent editorial leadership and intellectual inclusivity allow for broader democratic debate.

Recent scholarship stresses the importance of organizational apparatus in sustaining alternative journalism. Perera (2016) highlights that newspapers operating under conflict conditions in Sri Lanka relied on networks of solidarity, voluntary labor, and activist engagement rather than market logics. Similarly, Balasundaram (2019) shows how exiled journalists from Sri Lanka continue to function as agents of change by adapting their professional practices to hostile environments. These studies reinforce the central argument of this article: that the endurance of *Niyamuwa* and *Ravaya* cannot be understood outside their organizational frameworks, ideological clarity, and capacity to connect with marginalized publics.

Thus, the literature demonstrates that alternative press in repressive contexts performs functions beyond mere information dissemination: it fosters counter-publics, sustains hope amid authoritarianism, and redefines journalism as a political practice (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002). Sri Lanka's case, situated within this wider body of scholarship, highlights both the vulnerabilities and transformative potential of anti- and non-establishment newspapers in societies marked by political violence and democratic deficits.

Methodology

This study employs an ethnographic and archival methodology to analyze the organizational apparatus of *Niyamuwa* and *Ravaya*. Research was conducted between 2018 and 2022 in Colombo and selected provincial towns in Sri Lanka. Methods included:

1. **Archival Research:** Extensive review of past issues of Niyamuwa (1980s–1990s) and Ravaya (1980s–present) was conducted through newspaper archives, university libraries, and private collections. This enabled an understanding of the editorial priorities, thematic content, and political interventions of both papers over time.
2. **Ethnographic Fieldwork:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with former and current journalists, editors, activists, and long-term readers of both newspapers. Ethnographic engagement included attending public forums organized by Ravaya and informal gatherings of former Niyamuwa contributors. These accounts offered rich narrative insights into organizational culture, decision-making processes, and survival strategies.
3. **Participant Observation and Positionality:** As a Sri Lankan academic, the researcher’s positionality was critical to gaining trust in politically sensitive settings. Fieldwork emphasized reflexivity, acknowledging how the researcher’s background, affiliations, and perceived identity shaped access to sources and interpretations of narratives.
4. **Comparative Frame:** Findings were contextualized through a comparative review of literature on alternative press in South Asia, Latin America, and Africa, with emphasis on how newspapers function in semi-authoritarian environments.

The methodology thus integrates documentary evidence with lived experiences of journalists and readers, providing a holistic account of the organizational apparatus of Sri Lanka’s alternative press.

Findings and Discussion

The Political Context of Sri Lanka since 1977

Sri Lanka’s political trajectory after 1977 was marked by economic liberalization, ethnic polarization, and state repression. The open economy policies of the United National Party (UNP) government under J. R. Jayewardene coincided with constitutional reforms that concentrated executive power. The eruption of the ethnic conflict in the North and East, culminating in the civil war, and the southern insurrections led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), placed the island under near-constant emergency rule. Media institutions operated under heavy censorship, harassment, and surveillance. Journalists were often targeted by state forces, militant groups, and criminal gangs alike. It was within this repressive landscape that Niyamuwa and Ravaya attempted to build their presence.

The Organizational Apparatus of Niyamuwa

Niyamuwa was launched in the 1980s with close ties to Marxist intellectual circles and progressive activism. Its organizational model emphasized collective decision-making and volunteerism. Former contributors recalled how the newspaper operated with limited financial resources, often relying on donations, voluntary labor, and activist networks for distribution. The editorial stance was explicitly ideological—committed to extreme Marxist and

socialist principles—but its appeal extended to broader progressive circles disillusioned with mainstream parties.

One former journalist noted: “We didn’t see ourselves as employees of a company but as part of a movement. The newspaper was our weapon.” This ethos sustained the paper through economic hardship and state repression. However, *Niyamuwa* faced limitations due to its dependence on partisan affiliations, which constrained its readership base and subjected it to political targeting during periods of heightened conflict. By the 1990s, its presence had significantly weakened, though its symbolic role as a progressive organ remained significant.

Niyamuwa’s Role in the Post Insurrectionist Period from 1970- 1977 and from 1983 Onwards

Though suppressed militarily the culture of political confrontation and open resistance was to make its presence felt within the emerging socio-political order, and the culture of political communication in the country.

The JVP since late 1970’s worked on restructuring its party organization for any eventuality arising from oppressive policies that they thought would be advocated by the J.R Jayawardene regime. As a registered political party the JVP in the 1980’s claimed to have a membership of more than one million full time members/cadres. This number is enhanced through affiliated bodies such as the Socialist Student Union, Socialist Workers Union and the Socialist Farmers Union. All this enables the party to possess a reasonably formidable financial base to sustain its struggles.

When asked to elaborate on the type of organizational apparatus that controls *Niyamuwa*, a provincial Council Member of the JVP had this to say, “Unlike the bourgeoisie parties that rule the country without clear principles, we of the JVP take ourselves and the party seriously. We understand the value of organization with clear-cut political principles. Furthermore the elements of the party structure have been created for a purpose. *Niyamuwa* comes directly under the propaganda wing of the JVP. The Central Committee of the party determines the broad issues that the paper should address. The party stand is communicated to the newspaper. The hierarchy of the party has confidence in the editor to deal with these issues. Our comrades work full time and are remunerated by the party”.

A significant point emphasized by them related to their capacity to manage the newspaper as a dignified apparatus under the party’s central command. The editor and his staff are made to appreciate that theirs is a purposeful mission to educate the membership on party policies and instill confidence in them about the present and future struggles. A clear line of communication helps the editorial staff to safeguard professional autonomy preserving the scope of political journalism. As elaborated by a member of the editorial committee, “*Niyamuwa* helps to cement the structure of the party in many ways. For instance the key objective is to educate the working class and the students concerning the conspiracies of the Capitalist political parties in Sri Lanka. While doing so we propagate the Socialist Doctrine. We propose a way out of the current socio-political and economic anarchy in the country. Knowing that the system is getting weaker and the government would collapse sooner or later, we mobilize

support for the movement. We appeal to those who are at the receiving end. Also the paper tells the readership about the decisions taken at district and at provincial levels, and the way we hope to agitate in line with specific community interests. We keep step with the people and their struggles and add to the momentum of what the party has organized.

The JVP had been in the forefront of struggles waged by the Dry Zone farmers, Trade Union agitations against cost of living, student struggles against proposed privatization of universities, and against proposed constitutional reforms; forming a number of fronts for mass mobilization.

The propaganda committee members too work very closely with the newspaper and are ardently involved in taking the paper to the people. They take stock of what happens at grass roots level and talk to the people even when they sell the newspaper. The members request the potential buyers to ensure that they read and pass on the paper to others. Furthermore at a time when Sri Lankan political parties are notorious for indiscipline among cadres, the JVP believes in disciplining the membership. During the 1989 Insurrection, the JVP also punished its own members with death when they were traitors to its cause.

The impact of Regimentalist Culture on Political Communication

It instills in them a very high level of loyalty to the party cause. They pointed out that political communication initiatives fail to reap benefits without an image of reliability and credibility of those who work for the party. Therefore action is taken against those deemed as incompetent. The newspaper informs the people about steps taken to replace them.

The Organizational Apparatus of Ravaya

In contrast, Ravaya, founded by Victor Ivan in 1987, built itself as a fiercely independent weekly. Its organizational apparatus combined strong editorial leadership with an ethos of intellectual rigor and investigative journalism. Financially, Ravaya experimented with reader subscriptions, fundraising events, and solidarity contributions from civil society organizations. It cultivated a reputation as a platform for fearless critique, often publishing exposés on corruption, abuse of power, and failures of governance.

Status Conferred on Diversity

The editorial culture of Ravaya emphasized debate and inclusivity, allowing space for diverse political voices—from leftist activists to liberal reformists. Ethnographic interviews revealed how newsroom discussions were often heated but constructive, with a shared commitment to critical inquiry. One editor explained: “We fought inside the newsroom every week, but that was the strength of Ravaya. It was not a propaganda sheet; it was a forum.”

Unlike Niyamuwa, Ravaya’s independence allowed it to reach wider audiences, becoming a reference point for intellectual debate in Sri Lanka. Yet this independence also exposed it to relentless harassment, including lawsuits,

arrests, and violent threats. The newspaper's survival was tied to its organizational resilience and the charismatic leadership of Victor Ivan.

Ravaya as the Pioneering Non- Establishment Newspaper in Sri Lanka

Ravaya, just like *Niyamuwa* is an alternative newspaper representing the anti-establishment, but independent from political party control. It is edited by an ex-leader of the JVP, Victor Ivan, who was the joint Convener of the Free Media Movement. The SLFP led Marxist Coalition government imprisoned him after the failed insurrection of 1971. *Ravaya* commenced operations after his release. It came to the limelight with its capacity to be an effective voice of the marginalized and others disillusioned with the policies of the political right and left. At the very inception, *Ravaya* had the blessings of the formidable Sri Lankan NGO, Sarvodaya, committed to rural emancipation and empowerment. Being politically unaffiliated, it is able to attract a number of leading civil society activists to make regular contributions on issues that are of immediate concern to the socially and economically under privileged (Ruwanpathirana, 2022).

Alternative Policy on News Production and Accountability

Ravaya too has a formidable organizational apparatus and a consistent alternative policy on news production. The accountability of staffers is to the Editor who is also the proprietor of the paper. He basically decides on the overall direction of issues to be addressed. Being inspired by this leadership the journalists working here pursue fearless addressing of issues that are hardly covered by the Establishment as well as other so called independent newspapers. Such a need arises according to them due to proven cowardice displayed by mainstream newspapers whose pre-occupation is to appease the politically prominent and the affluent segments of the Sri Lankan population (Balasundaram, 2019).

The Power of Organization rooted in Alternative Ethos

In showing the importance that they conferred on 'organization', a young columnist at *Ravaya* looked at what happens within the prevailing order from a politically stimulating angle. He said that the underprivileged in traditional societies are compelled to complacently aid and abet the oppressive system since they had no scope of collective action. It was his position that the capacity of *Ravaya* to organize itself as a communication apparatus facilitated the struggle of the oppressed themselves. He argued that sociologists in these societies have been pro-establishment and conferred status to their own class aspirations with the argument that the oppressed willfully respected the powerful.

As elaborated by him: "It is a wrong assumption that they were willingly loyal to the oppressor. We see though our paper that they are prepared to speak out if they have a media channel trusted as their own. You will see that our writings are related to their sorrows and frustrations of being mocked and kicked about mercilessly".

Ravaya Journalists as Representatives of the Marginalised

Most *Ravaya* journalists are drawn from the marginalized themselves and are symbolic of the underprivileged. The move to draw such men and women enhance the capacity of the paper to relate to those occupying humble positions in Sri Lankan society. Their task is to empower them to speak for themselves. Being a society of major incompatibilities in social class relations, it was held that a large mass of people desired to read the type of material that they produced.

Exposing the Private Conduct of the Privileged

Referring to the way the current organizational policies facilitate this unique mission, a veteran journalist had this to say: “With the organisational objectives of the paper being clear to us, we know that the editor will not be resentful of the type of issues that we deal with and the style of language used. So we consider ourselves as a part of a cultural and political revival of forgotten classes and their burdens. These probably are not burdens to those living in big cities. Our organizational policies and our traditions create a bond between them and us. Most often we unearth stories that embarrass the influential. The poor villagers come out with atrocities that big people commit against them. We have revealed immoral actions of so called big people and show their nakedness. With the tradition created by us more and more ordinary people tell the truth. Just two weeks ago I wrote about a young Buddhist Bhikku who was sexually molested by a senior monk. The story was written based on what the victim’s associates had to tell after the young monk committed suicide. The victim’s corpse was found hanging on a Jack tree in the temple compound. The conventional papers had by this time given the impression that the suicide was due to acute depression caused through separation from the family. That was the story of the offending monk. He was politically affiliated and was patronized by the rich as well as powerful politicians in the village”.

Exposing Deficiencies of State Institutions

Of the other stories uncovered in recent times by *Rawaya* included the plight of prisoners in the two main Sri Lankan prisons in Welikada and Bogambara, with revelations concerning sexual intimidation, drug trafficking and racial discrimination by prison guards in connivance with assertive male prisoners. Respondents pointed out that their intention was to bring to light how total institutions like prisons, police and even the armed forces have become breeding grounds for greater crimes in a society where the rule of law has ceased to exist with acute politicization.

The articles explained the severe social cost of criminalization of Sri Lankan politics, and how appointments made by Ministers with criminal records made it impossible to apply the rule of law. Coomaraswamy, R. (1998: 243) explains how the government used its bureaucracy to harass *Rawaya* for the type of investigations they made. They sent officials of the Inland Revenue Department to ascertain whether they were paying their taxes and subsequently checked other financial records and circulation and distribution figures. Labour Department officials similarly

checked on wages and provident fund payments. The current President Kumaranatunga had on many occasions used language unbecoming of a Head of State to humiliate the Editor in public.

Referring to the status that the paper conferred to the gruesome murder of Tamil prisoners in Bindunuwewa in late 2000, a columnist held that the paper could establish that powerful politicians and members of the police orchestrated the entire attack. He showed how conventional papers tried to mislead the public by saying that this was the result of an internal dispute between inmates. He said that *Ravaya* considered it an obligation to reveal the truth as it was, since the mainstream papers were biased towards the majority Sinhala people.

As argued by him, “Even the opposition party papers do not look at real issues from an angle that represents reality. They merely blame the government for its inability to prevent the occurrence of these incidents. But what earthly use is that when the people need to know the inside story. These are the consequences of a brutalized culture of Sri Lankan politics”.

Being committed to a distinct organizational policy that respects the liberal assumption of press as a watch dog, *Ravaya* proves that investigative journalism in transitional societies could possibly help in reforming social institutions. This they said could be done by compelling the authorities to clean up their own act in the absence of checks and balances in society. It was argued that the Press as the watchdog is not one that power holders should fear. According to them, the alternative press could help to eradicate conditions that are counter-productive for its own welfare (Mendis, 2002).

It is assumed that the people at large want the press to liberate itself from the reactionary alliance between the press and the government and its loyalty to big businesses. Sri Lankan history from late 19th century up to independence in 1948 indicates that such an unhealthy trend was not there even during British Rule (Wickramasinghe, 2014). During this period the press could prove its resilience in humbling even British Governors and their officials who had anti-people tendencies. The Uva-Wellassa and Matale Rebellions in 1818 and 1848 respectively proved the potential of effective political communication strategies by the press against the Colonial administration.

These ideas expressed by Sri Lankan journalists reveal that the alternative press could either become a liberating force or a suppressed entity of no earthly relevance. This was dependent on the type of commitment they displayed towards the public cause. It further shows the importance of a well organized apparatus with commitment to a clear policy both editorially and politically if they are to succeed.

Comparative Reflections: Party Press vs Independent Alternative Press

The comparison between Niyamuwa and *Ravaya* illustrates two distinct models of alternative journalism in Sri Lanka. Niyamuwa, rooted in partisan political ideology, exemplified the strengths and vulnerabilities of party-

affiliated press: ideological cohesion but limited reach. Ravaya, while independent, demonstrated the potential of alternative media to construct a broad-based counter-public sphere, though at the cost of increased exposure to repression. Both cases reveal the critical importance of organizational culture—volunteerism, solidarity, editorial debate—in sustaining alternative journalism in contexts of political hostility (Perera, 2016).

The Scope of Sri Lankan Alternative Newspapers in Eliminating Political Apathy

One of the most significant contributions of Niyamuwa and Ravaya was their role in countering political apathy. During periods of extreme violence and authoritarianism, when citizens felt powerless, these newspapers provided a platform for critical engagement

. Readers described the act of purchasing and reading these papers as a form of resistance. Letters to the editor sections often became mini-forums for debate.

Ethnographic vignettes highlight this dynamic. A rural reader of Ravaya recalled: “We had no one to speak for us. When we saw our struggles in the newspaper, we felt less alone.” Such accounts demonstrate how alternative press, even with limited circulation, can contribute to democratic resilience by sustaining hope, debate, and critique in otherwise closed political environments.

Comparative Analysis: Alternative Press in the Global South

The Sri Lankan experience resonates with traditions of alternative journalism across the Global South. In Latin America, independent newspapers and community radio stations played vital roles in resisting authoritarian regimes during the 1970s and 1980s (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). In South Africa, underground press networks sustained anti-apartheid mobilization. In India and Nepal, small progressive papers fostered intellectual dissent despite censorship. These parallels suggest that alternative press functions not merely as a journalistic enterprise but as a political project of counter-hegemony (Downing, 2001).

What distinguishes Sri Lanka, however, is the intensity of political violence and the narrowness of democratic space. The survival of Niyamuwa and Ravaya under such conditions underscores the centrality of organizational apparatus—funding models, editorial practices, and solidarity networks—in enabling dissenting journalism.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that alternative newspapers in Sri Lanka have survived not despite, but because of their organizational resilience and ideological commitments. Niyamuwa embodied the strengths and weaknesses of partisan press, while Ravaya exemplified the possibilities of independent journalism in fostering democratic discourse. Both papers played critical roles in countering political apathy and sustaining dissent during periods of authoritarianism and conflict.

Beyond the Sri Lankan case, this research highlights the broader importance of alternative media in the Global

South as sites of democratic struggle. The resilience of such outlets is inseparable from their organizational apparatus—structures of collective decision-making, solidarity-based funding, and inclusive editorial cultures. For policymakers and media activists, the lesson is clear: strengthening democratic media requires investment not only in technology or freedom-of-expression laws, but in the everyday organizational cultures that sustain independent journalism.

Future research could explore comparative trajectories of alternative newspapers across South Asia, focusing on how different organizational models adapt to shifting political and technological environments. As mainstream media becomes increasingly captured by market and state interests, the relevance of dissenting journalism as a democratic safeguard remains more vital than ever.

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