

Eelam Online



Eelam Online:  
The Tamil Diaspora and War in Sri Lanka

By

Maya Ranganathan

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

---

P U B L I S H I N G

Eelam Online:  
The Tamil Diaspora and War in Sri Lanka,  
by Maya Ranganathan

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by Maya Ranganathan

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2691-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2691-4

*For those whose dreams have been shattered, not once but many times,*

*And who yet manage to find that glimmer of hope to hold on to.*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ix
------------------------	----

## PART I

Chapter One.....	3
Introduction: The Nation on the Net	
Chapter Two .....	13
Computer Mediated Communication and Political Communities	
Chapter Three .....	25
Nurturing Eelam on the Net	
Chapter Four .....	39
Diaspora Dynamics Online	
Chapter Five .....	53
The Virtual is Too “Real”	

## PART II

Chapter Six .....	69
The Imagi-nation of Eelam	
Chapter Seven.....	81
“Objectivity” Online and Opinion Offline	
Chapter Eight.....	97
The Making of the Tamil Homeland	

## PART III

Chapter Nine.....	113
More at Home Far Away from Home	

Chapter Ten ..... 125

Conclusion: So Close to Home Yet Far Away

Appendix A ..... 141

Appendix B..... 145

Bibliography ..... 147

Index ..... 167

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have travelled with me on this journey of over a decade in tracing the employment of new media to construct and nurture national identities in the Sri Lankan context. My first debt of gratitude goes to my Ph.D. supervisor, R.M.I.T. Globalism Institute Chair and Professor Paul James. He introduced me to the complexities of national identity formation, which led me to explore the issue in the context of media, particularly new media. The interest he kindled in the year 2000, at the time of the dot-com boom, has withstood the bursting of the bubble, rendering many earlier predictions irrelevant, the vagaries of the websites which went on and offline during the years posing difficulties to every hypothesis, and the drastic changes in the Sri Lankan political scenario that put into question some earlier assumptions; the culmination is this work, ten years later.

I was fortunate enough to win a postdoctoral fellowship with my alma mater, three years after I graduated from the institution with a Ph.D. A two-year fellowship from the School of Humanities, Communication and Social Sciences (HUMCASS) at Monash University, Victoria, Australia, between 2007 and 2009 provided me with an opportunity to look beyond the potential of websites to construct and convey identities. My association with Professor Jenny Hocking of the School of Journalism and Australian Studies, Monash University, has been as long as my association with the project, and it is to her guidance that I owe this publication. The data collection for this work was funded by a HUMCASS grant in 2008. Several colleagues at Monash University have helped hone my arguments, and I want to particularly thank Bruce Scates, Mark Gibson and Tony Moore for their support and encouragement.

V.R. Venkataraman, or simply “Venkat,” with his deep knowledge of and interest in the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, proved to be an invaluable source, and his contribution to the project went beyond identifying potential respondents in Melbourne. The data collection in Sydney was made possible by my friend and University of Madras classmate Raymond Selvaraj, and Bala Balendra who introduced me to a number of migrants. I recall with gratitude the contribution of Chandrabhasan of the Organisation for Eelam Refugees and Rehabilitation (OfERR), Es Po of Mitra Publications

and Mathivanan in Chennai, in arranging access to refugees and migrants in Tamil Nadu.

This book has also benefitted from the insightful comments of the examiners of my Ph.D. thesis. Some of the chapters have been fashioned out of journal articles published in the last decade, and I thank the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and readers for their responses, which led to clarity of thought and argument. I owe special thanks to University of Adelaide Adjunct Associate Professor Michael Roberts and Dr Anoma Pieris for being my sounding boards and questioning many perceptions. Special thanks to Judy Waters Pasqualge in Colombo, Sri Lanka, for editing the manuscript.

Finally, I thank my mother, Janaki Ranganathan, for her unstinting support to my research through some very trying times; Sudha Ravi for sourcing material in the Indian press; Seline D. Augustine for arranging meetings with journalists in Chennai; and Dinesh Kumar for his insight into conflict reporting.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my respondents who spared time and effort to talk to me patiently about the Sri Lankan ethnic issue. It could not have been easy for them to relive their pasts, even as they were witnessing the unfolding of momentous events that have probably changed the political scenario forever. One of them is sadly no more with us. I hope this volume is a fitting tribute to all of them.

—Maya Ranganathan  
December 2010

# **PART I**



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: THE NATION ON THE NET

In a postscript to a journal article in June 2009, a month since the “exit” of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, I recorded that the media were still preoccupied with the uncertainty of the future of Tamil nationalism. The focus of the media, both traditional and new, seemed to be on addressing the political problems of the Tamil community. It was not clear whether the decimation of the “guerrilla group” marked the beginning of very different politics, and if that politics would lead to different dynamics in the media and the virtual world of Sri Lankan politics.

A year-and-a-half hence, the situation seems no different. The changes in the political landscape do not seem to have wrought significant changes in the media. The “different kinds of Tamil voices” are yet to be heard. On the contrary, some websites have closed, and the plurality of voices in the virtual world is becoming a faint hope. The focus in the media continues to be on political problems, and much of the literature published in the year since the LTTE’s military defeat has focussed on the operation and the strengths and weaknesses of the outfit. The media, both online and offline, seem to now be engaged in a blame game in an effort to understand how the situation evolved to the present stage. While the dominant media have been reporting on the ground situation in Sri Lanka, the few websites that carry on, unmindful of the changes to sustain the movement for a Tamil nation, have been focussing on the diaspora<sup>1</sup> and envisaging a role for it in the Tamil question.

It is in this framework that this work is to be considered. It is not a work directly related to the political aspect of the ethnic question in Sri Lanka, and hence does not argue the validity of the claims of the state or the “antagonists.” It takes the ethnic issue as a given and explores the way in which new media, particularly the internet, have added dimensions to the issue. My work on exploring online Tamil nationalism with relevance to Sri Lanka began in 2000 when the LTTE had already achieved considerable success in the employment of new-media technologies to create and sustain nationalist ideologies. The use of internet technology by

the widely dispersed Tamils had been studied by a few scholars, such as Peter Chalk (2000: online) and Pradeep Jeganathan (1998). A major study between 2000 and 2004 looked at how websites worked towards constructing and conveying the Eelam identity by dissecting the content in some of them that dealt with the issue (Ranganathan, 2004). The initial part of this work draws from that study in a significant way.

Based on the argument that the internet has a tremendous potential to construct, convey and nurture nationalist ideologies, especially in the context of a conflict-generated widely dispersed diaspora in the West, the latter part of the study focusses on how the members of the diaspora perceive and negotiate information they receive through the internet, or more particularly the World Wide Web (www). Much as Christians argues in the context of Ellul's "sociological propaganda," the focus here is not so much technology or the technological products, but the "psychopolitical imaginary universe which humans constitute and reinforce" (1995: 166).

The study is to be understood in the context of the history of the ethnic issue. The claims of the Tamils, who constitute 8.2% (12.6% and 4.3% according to some sources)<sup>2</sup> of the population living in an area of 25,332 square miles (the size of Sri Lanka), are influenced by who the early settlers were (Sivarajah, 1996; Wilson, 2000). The northern and the eastern parts of the island are occupied by Tamils (the 5.6% Indian Tamils who are of more recent Indian origin live with the Sinhalese in the central highlands), and the rest by the Sinhalese. However, if pro-Tamil media reports are to be relied upon, the demographic profile of the regions could well be undergoing a change, with reports of Sinhalese settlements in Tamil areas (Tamilnet, 2010: online).

To briefly cover the salient events in the vast history relating to the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, the two units were administered separately until the arrival of the British who conquered Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Jaffna in 1795; Colombo in 1796; clubbed the coast with the Madras Presidency in 1798; made Ceylon a Crown Colony in 1802; and finally took the Kandyan kingdom in 1815. In 1833 the British placed both the Sinhalese and Tamil-occupied areas under a centralised government. The traditional factors of race, territory, religion and language helped promote the distinct national identity of Sri Lankan Tamils. Perhaps, as a reaction to Sinhalese nationalism, the Tamils continued to maintain and perpetuate their separate identity. This was aided by the British government's policy of facilitating communal representation in the Legislative Council. A rift between the Sinhalese and Tamil political leadership occurred in 1924 over the issue of territorial representation and a reserved seat for the Tamils of the Western Province. The rift was complete in 1931 with the

introduction of universal suffrage, which worked to the disadvantage of Tamils. However, in 1946 the Sinhalese and Tamil political elites agreed on a constitutional settlement for independence.

On 4 February 1948 “Ceylon” was granted independence.<sup>3</sup> The differences between the two communities reached a pitch with the introduction of the “Sinhala only” policy in 1956.<sup>4</sup> Senior Tamil politicians sought to arrive at agreements with subsequent Sinhala governments for the protection of the rights of minority Tamils. However, disenchantment among younger members of the community with the ineffectiveness of methods of the moderate Tamils grew steadily worse.<sup>5</sup> The situation was exacerbated from 1970 with the introduction of the new system of standardisation in admission to universities,<sup>6</sup> and with the new Constitution in 1972, which made Sinhala the only official language and Buddhism the state religion. This was reportedly a consequence of the belief that Buddha gave the island of Sri Lanka to the Sinhalese to preserve the purest form of Buddhism, that is Theravada Buddhism (Fox, 2002). By then, Tamil youth had taken to arms, motivated by the abortive armed insurgency led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in Sri Lanka and the armed struggle of Mukti Bahini in East Pakistan, which, with the help of India, led to the birth of Bangladesh. The LTTE was formed in 1972, and its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran hit the news headlines in 1975 when he assassinated Jaffna mayor Alfred Duraiappah. Equipped with a disciplined army well versed in guerrilla warfare, the LTTE, in the course of time, had annihilated other Tamil political groups and taken charge of the movement for Eelam.<sup>7</sup> In 1976, with the signing of the Vaddukkodai resolution, the demand of the Tamils changed from a federal constitution to a sovereign state. Relations between Tamils and Sinhalese were worsened by the 1983 pogrom, which followed an LTTE ambush of an army truck in which 13 soldiers were killed; the constitutional amendment in the same year that demanded that Tamil members of Parliament take an oath of allegiance to the unitary state; and the role of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) sent by then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1987 to establish peace in the island. The following are too momentous to be summarised in this study, which is devoted to exploring the internet as a weapon in the LTTE’s armoury: the Norwegian-brokered peace accord, which led to a unilateral ceasefire by the LTTE in February 2002<sup>8</sup>; the tsunami that ravaged Sri Lanka in December 2004; the election of Mahinda Rajapakse as president in November 2005 on the plank of ending the civil war; the disappearance of people, a majority of them Tamil, while in the custody of Sri Lankan security forces; the torture of Tamils by both the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE; the resumption of hostilities between the LTTE and

the Sri Lankan government in 2007; and President Rajapakse's subsequent re-election in January 2010.

The points of significance in the sketchy history above are: the transmigrations that resulted owing to the volatile situation in Sri Lanka; the growing diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamils in western countries, which are technologically more advanced; the situation in Sri Lanka and several neighbouring countries that resulted in a denial of voice to the Tamils in general, and in the LTTE taking on the mantle of leading the fight for Tamil rights in Sri Lanka; and the exploitation of an international medium such as the internet for addressing the dispersed Tamil audience in order to sustain the fight for rights in Sri Lanka. Considered in light of the above, the use of the internet by Tamils for the cause, particularly those supporting the LTTE's means to achieve its objective, squares very well with Anderson's exposition of the "paradoxical double movement of integration and disintegration" (1998: 59) peculiar to our times, which he termed "long-distance nationalism." Anderson identified the communication revolution as having dramatically changed the experience of the migrant. The same technology, which helped migrants stay in touch with their lands and people even after moving thousands of miles away, also promoted long-distance nationalism.

However, Anderson concluded that "long-distance nationalism" led to extremism and called this a "menacing portent for the future" (1998: 74). One of the serious consequences of this is the kind of "serious" and "radically unaccountable" politics it created (Anderson, 1998: 74).

The participant rarely pays taxes in the country in which he does his politics: he is not answerable to its judicial system; he probably does not cast even an absentee ballot in its elections because he is a citizen in a different place; he need not fear prison, torture or death, nor need his immediate family. But, well and safely positioned in the First World, he can send money and guns, circulate propaganda, and build intercontinental computer information circuits, all of which have incalculable consequences in the zones of their ultimate destinations.

While the definition of "extremism" and whether a group can be termed "extremist" or "terrorist" are debatable, in the context of this study, the set of possibilities that technological advancements in communication facilitate and the way marginalised groups have employed them to further their cause cannot be questioned. It is modern communication circuits, such as the internet, e-mail and electronic transfers of money, which convey information and currencies in hours, if not minutes, that have enabled

manifestations of “long-distance nationalism,” be they favourable or unfavourable.

## Organisation of the book

I place this work in the above context. While there are indeed many marginalised groups that have found in the internet a potent tool to construct identities, I focus on the Sri Lankan Tamils owing to the fact that they were one of the earliest groups to tap the potential of the medium. As one political commentator said, the “Government of Sri Lanka has neither developed a systematic plan nor the organisation to cripple the backbone of this network. The backbone, which is political propaganda, is aimed at building support for the creation of a separate state, the LTTE as an organisation and Prabhakaran as its leader” (Gunaratna, 1998: online). The LTTE’s early forays online and its employment of the medium in the struggle for Tamil rights inform the argument in the earlier chapters.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part of the book outlines the suitability of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), particularly the internet, in the creation and sustenance of national identities. Considering that the book overflows into the areas of political communication, journalism, media theories and studies, nationalism, and social psychology, it is well nigh impossible to attempt an exhaustive literature review. An attempt has however been made to point to the relevant theories and place the issue of the internet and political identities in a broad multidisciplinary framework. The second and third parts of the book place the responses of Sri Lankan migrants in Australia in this broader framework in order to understand “the various social forces that impinge upon individuals as they think about, understand and express their opinions” (Price and Oshagan, 1995: 178).

The first part of the book deals with the potential of the medium of the internet to construct, convey and nurture nationalist ideologies and identities, with relevance to the Sri Lankan Tamil situation. Of particular significance in the vast literature on nationalism is Hobsbawm’s distinction between the nationalisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (1995). The nation-states that were formed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were an amalgamation of different ethnicities and languages that had been brought together under the one umbrella of an often painstakingly created national culture (Hobsbawm, 1995: 362). However, present-day nationalisms demand the exact opposite. Claims by nationalists are based on differences—of either language or religion or ethnicity or all of them. Drawing hence from the definitions of “nation” propounded by Calhoun (1998: 4), Stalin (cited in

Alba, 1968: 8) and Renan (1995: 152), the study looks at nation as a group with shared beliefs and a common descent. The “nation” is seen as a lived abstraction, an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991; James, 1996), although not a fiction. It is both a practice and a carefully constructed concept—constructed with cultural, economic and often political images. Imagery, symbols, flags, common economic activity and language together contribute to the creation of nationhood among a community. The transformation of the “nation” into the political being of a “nation-state” follows Milosav Hroch’s three stages: the first phase of intellectual inquiry into the past, the history and the culture of the community; the second phase of the dissemination of the information and winning over the support of a large number of people; and the last phase of the transformation of the demand of a few into a people’s movement (Hroch, 1995: 67). Chapter Two expostulates the way in which the internet, particularly the www, contributes to the second phase, perhaps leading to the third.

Chapter Three looks at how the internet is specially suited to constructing an Eelam identity and conveying Eelam nationalist ideologies in the context of some of the unique characteristics that govern the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Tracing the socio-political and economic factors that influence the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, the chapter looks at how the internet has the potential to help Sri Lankan Tamils play Anderson’s “long-distance nationalist” (1998: 74):

His politics, unlike those of activists for global human rights or environmental causes, are neither intermittent nor serendipitous. They are deeply rooted in a consciousness that his exile is self-chosen and that the nationalism he claims on e-mail is also the ground on which an embattled ethnic identity is to be fashioned in the ethnicised nation-state that he remains determined to inhabit. That same metropole that marginalises and stigmatises him simultaneously enables him to play, in a flash, on the other side of the planet, national hero.

In Chapter Four the argument is moved to the diaspora, which has played a very significant role in the three-decade civil war in Sri Lanka. While the support the diaspora has extended to the struggle has been well-documented (Wayland, 2004), the diaspora has been pole-vaulted into centre stage since the “decimation” of the LTTE in May 2008. This has contributed to the focus being shifted to expatriate Sri Lankan Tamils, with more recent media discourses placing the onus of continuing the struggle that has been “brutally suppressed” in Sri Lanka to outside the geographical centre of the nation, even in the virtual world. The chapter explores how the study of diaspora usage of the medium can lead to an

understanding of the issue and the trajectory that it could take in the future.

Part II and Part III are constructed from the responses gathered over two years from members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Australia. It is estimated that there are 30,000 Tamil migrants/refugees out of a total Sri Lankan population of over 80,000, according to the 2006 census cited by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (online). The first wave of migration was of those brought in to work in the cane plantations in northern Queensland. According to the Department of Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA, now DIAC), people of Sri Lankan origin were later found working in gold-mining fields of New South Wales and as peelers in Broome, Western Australia (online). The subsequent waves were, of course, sparked by the civil war in Sri Lanka. Most of those who enter the country as refugees become migrants in the course of time.<sup>9</sup> According to DIMIA, the Sri Lankans (not just Tamils) were granted entry into Australia under the Special Assistance Category (SAC) Class 215 introduced by the Commonwealth Government in 1995. There was also significant migration under the Family Migration Program, the Onshore Protection Program and the Skilled Migration Program (online). The majority are settled in Victoria and New South Wales and, while initial entrants were highly qualified, the later migrants are reportedly less so. While the above statistics allow for the drawing of a representative data set, I must clarify that the respondents whose responses inform the second and third parts of the book are in no way representative. The main reason for the failure to speak to a representative sample was the period of study. The data was collected in 2008 and 2009, the years when the conflict was most violent and culminated in the supposed decimation of the LTTE. The reluctance of many Tamil organisations to allow their members to be interviewed on the ethnic issue at a politically sensitive time led me to opt for the snowball sample method, which despite my best efforts remained not wholly representative of the population. The data collection in India among refugees was hampered by the dynamics of the relations between the Tamil Nadu government and the Union Government of India on the issue of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu, with most organisations and individuals explaining the need to pussyfoot on the issue. I hence reiterate that no argument is made that the social systems described in the study are immutable or self-regulating. The work supports Moscovici's model of regarding social systems as dynamic, and that they can at best be regarded as transitory and momentary (1976).

Chapter Five is a study of the virtual sphere that Sri Lankan Tamils inhabited during the peak of the civil war. It details how the virtual world,

despite its potential to mask identity offering a cloak of anonymity to the user and thus facilitating uninhibited discussion, can end up mirroring the situation of fear and anxiety on the ground in Sri Lanka. While focussing on the use of the medium by Sri Lankan Tamils only, it does not argue that the Tamils alone are responsible for contributing to the environment of fear nor imply that the use of the medium by the pro-Sinhala forces is any better. The chapter is a case study of how the virtual world can become the figurative deep, dark alley where one must fear to tread.

Chapter Six takes a look at the world of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Australia in order to understand the imagination of Eelam, the homeland that the Tamils are determined to inhabit. It looks at how the diaspora experiences ethnic identity and how the identity manifests itself in their everyday life in a foreign land, perhaps professing totally different cultural values. In the context of the negligible information available in the dominant media about the political affairs in Sri Lanka, and the accessibility to other sources of information such as diasporic newspapers, radio and television, it explores the significance of the internet as a source of information. It details what motivates the respondents to look for online sources and how often they feel the need to access them. Statistical data on what percentage of the population takes recourse to online sources are not available owing to methodological reasons detailed earlier. However, the chapter places pointers to where online sources figure in the map of sources of information on the ethnic issue.

Chapter Seven deals with the dogged issue of the credibility of information received online. Considering that the internet facilitates easy upload of information without the process of peer review that is intrinsically built into other media, and that the characteristics of anonymity that it facilitates seem to place a question mark on the veracity of the information that it conveys, it looks at how respondents perceive the information that they gather through the medium. Interestingly, while scepticism of the media in general seems to extend to the online media as well, the chapter throws light on how credibility is ascribed to online media sources, not based so much on how they construct reality but on how the construction correlates with individual perceptions of reality. In the context of media studies this chapter offers an interesting insight, as “bias” and “objectivity” seem to lie more with the reader whose experiences dictate perceptions than with the producer of the message.

Based on the exposition in Part I of the potential of the internet to create, convey and nurture nationalist ideologies, Chapter Eight looks at how identities are manifest in troubled times, when the nation is besieged and calls upon its members to act in its defence. It seeks to understand if

indeed the members' exposure to a multitude of sources prompts them to act decisively in defence of the nation or contributes to indifference. While the lack of a representative sample, and also the fact that the period in which the respondents were interviewed could have led to cautious answers, make it difficult to come up with a forceful argument, the chapter nevertheless indicates that while the internet facilitates nationalism, it is mostly confined online and does not extend to the real world where other factors come into play.

The last section Part III looks at two categories of Sri Lankan Tamils who have moved out of the geographic boundaries of the nation with the purpose of understanding differences, if any, in perceptions of online sources dictated by age, experience and physical location. Chapter Nine is a compilation of responses of second-generation migrants in Australia, whose perceptions have been influenced not just by the fact that their experiences of the issue are second-hand, but also by the fact that they have been exposed to a western system of education that enjoins them to probe and question opinions and by their technological facility.

In direct contrast are the conditions of refugees in India, housed in camps with basic facilities that make internet access a luxury. The fact that they live without the trappings of the life in the west with access to technology being questionable, that they lack the means to move to a better country for refuge, and that the physical proximity to the geographical boundaries of the nation of Eelam enables more personal contact, provides for a different migrant experience, which is explored in Chapter Ten.

In summary, the book underscores the role of computer-mediated communication technologies, particularly the www that runs on the internet, in the creation and sustenance of nationalist ideologies among the widely dispersed diaspora. While some of the issues may apply to all diasporas, the issues discussed here are of particular significance to conflict-generated diasporas, whose interaction dynamics are becoming the focus of studies in many countries that consist of an amalgamation of ethnicities. While I understand that the lack of a representative sample and the insistence of the respondents on complete anonymity are issues of concern, I hope that this book will contribute to an understanding of the dynamics, even if in a small measure, and will spur research on the increasingly significant role that communication technologies play in deciding the weave and warp of the fabric of a nation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘diaspora’ is used to refer to ‘immigrant’, ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum-seeker’, not to discount the varying conditions underlying population movements, but to signal the similarity. See Brah, 1996: 178-210.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Sri\\_Lanka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Sri_Lanka), <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/PDF/p7%20population%20and%20Housing%20Text-11-12-06.pdf> accessed on 8 December 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972.

<sup>4</sup> With “Sinhala Only” the government decreed a change to “swabasha,” i.e., either Sinhala or Tamil as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. Children must be educated in their mother tongue, Sinhala for Sinhalese children and Tamil for Tamil children. The language of administration and employment was Sinhala, which put Tamil-educated youth at a disadvantage. See also SinhalaOnlyAct: online.

<sup>5</sup> The first phase of violence in the island was in the mid and late fifties, according to Nayak (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Since the 1960s it was alleged that Tamil students were admitted to universities, particularly to science, medical and engineering courses, in disproportionate numbers. Following a memo submitted to the prime minister by the Sinhala Youth Front, the United Front Government introduced the scheme by which a Tamil student was required to obtain a higher aggregate than a Sinhala student for admission to certain courses. For a detailed account of the ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka, see de Silva (1986), Hettige and Mayer (2000) and Ponnambalam (1983).

<sup>7</sup> The LTTE is responsible for the killing of 53 Tamil politicians who did not subscribe to its ideology, according to [http://www.spur.asn.au/prominent\\_tamil\\_leaders\\_killed.htm](http://www.spur.asn.au/prominent_tamil_leaders_killed.htm) accessed on 7 November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of the history of the struggle see Bose, 2007: 6-54.

<sup>9</sup> Hence, “migrant” is used as a blanket term to refer to all the Sri Lankan Tamils in Australia, excluding those on a temporary visa.

## CHAPTER TWO

# COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL COMMUNITIES

This work starts with the premise that Jacques Ellul's assertion that technological phenomenon defines our lives today is very true (1965: xvii; 1982: 175-77). The influence of technology on every sphere of activity has indeed organised and reorganised society, particularly in the area of politics and political communication. The study of political communication in technological structures helps lay bare the meaning of the very epoch (Ellul, 1978: 216). Baudrillard's "hyper-reality" (1983) becomes relevant in seeming to make things "transparent, visible," as also the "precession of the simulacra." At the same time it must be pointed out that this work does not argue for technological determinism. This study takes into account earlier research that has qualified the effects of political communication on new media (Davis, 1998; Norris, 2000). Nowhere in the following pages is it implied that technology works independently of other factors. The book attempts instead to point to various sociological and political factors, which may have been reordered by technological structures that influence a society's goals.

To put it rather simply, in the era we live in, mass media indeed "codify social, political and moral standards" (Ellul, 1965: 163). But the technologies, purportedly used to bring people closer together, are at the same time disembedding social relations and compartmentalising people into smaller and smaller communities. On the one hand, the internet (or "the Net")<sup>1</sup> has enhanced global connectivity and international interactivity. On the other, computer-mediated communication (CMC), particularly the internet, is said to contribute to the creation of *Gemeinschaft* ("relationships that are intimate, enduring and based upon a clear understanding of where each person stands in society") (Bell and Newby cited in Jankowski, 2002: 37-38). While much attention has been paid to the way in which CMC permits the simulation of communities and how relations of "virtual" connection may or may not overlay "real" communities (Baudrillard, 1983: 3), this chapter is a theoretical exploration of an area upon which

there has been relatively less focus— the potential of CMC in political communication.

### **Articulation of space in the virtual sphere**

Given the border-transgressing nature of the internet, the technology can be expected to “affect the conduct of states in three broad areas” (Everard, 2000: 76). It could change the way in which the political, economic and social space is articulated. As VanAelst pointed out, information and communication technologies (ICTs) do make political action “faster, easier and more universal” (2002: 494). They remove the obstacles to collective action and help band people together on the basis of their interests and concerns, notwithstanding the fact that they cannot substitute for “real” participation. Social movements may be said to prevail when the following are present: “a network of organisations, on the basis of a shared collective identity, mobilising people to join in mostly unconventional actions to obtain social or political goals” (Duyvendak, Koopmans, Diani and Eyerman cited in VanAelst, 2002: 494). The internet provides the conditions for all this. It is part of a network of organisations and is usually linked to other organisations in the virtual sphere; people mostly visit a site owing to their interests; and the internet enables participation thanks to its technological features. Perceived in this context, does the internet then, because of its potential to draw people together, make the borders of the nation more traversable and less bound by overt state management? Many commentators have argued that the web, by challenging the barriers of time and distance, will eventually lead to the erosion of the sovereign state. What does the technology of the internet, the “ultimate in globalisation” transcending time and distance, mean to the kind of state that “depends on borders” (Everard, 2000: ix)?

In the context of discussions on the spread of nationalism in contemporary global society, the study looks at ways in which the technology of the internet divides as it unites, and at ways in which the division and the unification take place. One of the issues it focusses on is whether the internet provides for what writers like Calhoun called “alternative democratic media strategies” (1992: 33). Does the internet act as the public sphere, as Habermas described: “the court before which public prestige can be displayed rather than in which critical debate is carried on” (1989: 201)? Does the internet spawn “counter public spheres” that stand in opposition to dominant public spheres (Downey and Fenton, 2003: 193)? The answers to these questions lie in the attributes and

features of the internet, such as hypertext and interactivity and their contribution to the creation of communities.

In Bolter and Grusin's words, "the www is not merely a software protocol and text and data files. It is also the sum of the uses to which this protocol is being put" (1999: 19). This work focusses on the ways in which the internet helps in the crystallisation of an already-existing nation. It does not delve into the issue of whether a culturally produced virtual community (that does not have a corresponding presence in the world of bodies and things) can exist in cyberspace. Since the internet user participates in the "production of a discursive community," the textual nature of the communities becomes important (Mitra, 1997: 58). According to Mitra, "what produces community in the era of the Internet are the shared systems of culture, language, and beliefs that are spread across large distances and consequently the opportunities for community formation" (1997: 57). Of course, the internet's efficacy in binding communities together has been questioned in some contexts, and it has emerged that in the absence of conducive social, cultural and political factors, the discourse on the internet itself is far from effective. As Papacharissi pointed out, while "Internet-related technologies can certainly help connect, motivate and organise dissent," the matter of "whether the expression of dissent is powerful enough to effect social change is a question of human agency and a much more complex issue" (2002: 20). The virtual is understood as a "historical articulation of the real, fully as actual as any other articulation but one connected specifically with computer-mediated communication technologies" (Poster, 2001: 164). The "real" in this book is used as a shorthand for the world of institutionalised politics and identifiable bodies, while the "virtual" is used to denote the level of association carried by computer mediation.

### **The internet's potential to transmit nationalist ideologies**

If one can broadly categorise the literature on the Net and politics, the first category comprises works by authors such as Bowers (1988), Burnham (1984), Cronkite (1983) and Zuboff (1988), who looked at the internet as a tool to realise the Orwellian society; and the second category comprises works of those who perceived Net-based technologies as an answer to many of the social, cultural and the political problems that plague society today. Significantly, both projections were based on the technological features of the medium, which seemed to undermine the power of the nation-state at the same time endowing it with absolute power, irrespective of the human agency that employed it. In the political

arena, utopian projections of the internet include: bringing people together on common grounds, creating new politics and social relations by its ability to incorporate a whole range of texts, its ability to transgress physical distances efficiently, the facility it extends to the user to assume anonymity and indulge in identity play, and the creation of a virtual public sphere. The geographical border-transgressing nature of the Net, which enables the bridging of “temporal and spatial gaps” (Baker and Ward, 2002: 207) and the facility to mask identities (Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998; Rheingold, 1993), has particularly contributed to perceptions that the internet would spur more people to actively participate in the political affairs of the nation. The internet is expected to act as a “public sphere,” the absence of which Jürgen Habermas discussed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). Net-based technologies are expected to create a sophisticated version of the Greek *agora*, where citizens interact with one another and enable the state to arrive at a political consensus on the issues affecting the nation. Tsagarousianou, Tambini and Bryan pointed to the lack of “proper public spaces,” “of a public sphere not colonised by state and political parties and not subjected to the logics of commercialisation and commodification prevalent in contemporary Western societies—a public sphere in which citizens could freely engage in deliberation and public debate” (1998: 4). They prophesied that new media technologies will provide this public space that will consequently herald the resurgence of democracy (1998: 5). Their projections were based solely on the attribute of the medium that permits relatively free access to information and on the interactivity of the medium that facilitates easy reply. However, Tsagarousianou argued that the effectiveness of the medium would depend on the way in which it is employed by the people (1998: 176).

Indeed, more than leading to a resurgence of democracy, the internet seems to be employed to create an “oppositional public sphere” or a multiplicity of public spheres in the way that Negt and Kluge elaborated (1993). This assertion is in opposition to McLuhan’s theory that the electronic media work against nationalism (Grosswiler, 1998). In fact, as Grosswiler (1998) said, the speed and reach of the media make the propagation of nationalism possible in ways not possible before its advent. Rather than dwelling on its potential for propaganda in particular contexts, the aim in the sections that follow is to examine how the internet fits into the totality of the propagandistic system in which media participates (Christians, 1995: 162).

It is interesting that internet-based technologies permit “members of a geographically defined community to interact and maintain the

communications flow of 'community interest' without requiring a concurrent proximate physical or temporal presence" (Baker and Ward, 2002: 210). What is, however, more interesting in the context of this study is that the abstract communities thus built are more a reflection of geographical communities than "substantively their own environments" (Holmes, 1997: 28). Computerisation seems to offer a solution to the problems of carrying out the "place-centred" functions of nations (*Ibid.*), which is especially significant in the context of mass migrations that have led to wide dispersions of populations. In accordance with the definition of the nation as an "abstract community" (James, 1996), computer-based communication technologies have come to be employed to "simulate presence and overcome absence in the physical world," and in the process contribute to the creation of new identities, even while they carry old ones (Holmes, 1997: 29). What is also of interest here is that computer-mediated communication, particularly websites, lead to conscious consumption of cultural commodities strengthening existing identities, particularly political identities (Holmes, 1997: 39).

Thus, on the lines of what Harrison, Zappen and Prell suggested, it can be argued that "for every relation that suggests a positive relation between new technologies and democracy, there is an opposite and diametrical counter-position that suggests that new technologies will inhibit, constrain or retard democracy" (2002: 250) or, as Papacharissi said, the internet at the same time curtails and augments the potential of creating a virtual public sphere (2002: 9). While the Net-based technologies provide "a new public space for politically oriented conversation," they conform to the political patterns in the real world, rather than create radically different, new patterns (Papacharissi, 2002: 9). The potential of the internet as a tool of political communication assumes great importance in the context of the present trend of mass migration, which has "resulted in the emergence of (virtual) communities based on geographically distributed sources of information production and exchange rather than the geographic proximity of community members to one another" (Baker and Ward, 2002: 207).

The process of planned construction of national identity involves invoking one of multiple possible identities and making a "particular definition of that identity, the only relevant or legitimate one in political contexts" (Gagnon, 1997: 139). People may be persuaded or forced to adopt the identity thus created. In the latter case, the process of nation-formation is violent, with one group imposing a particular identity on the collective. Nevertheless, the identity does not arise from the mind or the body of an individual (Billig, 1995: 7), but is a consequence of societal influences. A nation, itself like a society, to use Mascioni's words, is "a

people who interact with one another within a limited territory and who share a culture” (cited in Billig, 1995: 53). The bonds of interaction are based on a claim to a common territory made on the strength of the commonality among the people who occupy the territory. As there are “infinite ways” of imagining communities, nations tend to stress a particular aspect to give the community a distinct identity (Billig, 1995: 24). This aspect, while drawing the members of the nation into a cohesive group, also differentiates them from the rest. Individuals, while being made conscious of their identity, are at the same time made aware of what makes their identity different from that of those outside their group. As Seton-Watson said, nationhood involves attempts “to prove that, in contrast to the community to which the definer belonged, some other group was not entitled to be called a nation” (1977: 44). Nations, hence, are always defined in the context of other nations.

Modern nationalism is attributed, among other things, to “print capitalism,” which Anderson so fascinatingly described (Anderson, 1991). If “newspaper stories, weather reports, films, television shows, advertisements” (Kramer, 1998: 10) construct cultural identities, which people absorb without further reflection, the internet, comprising as it does the features of the print media and with its capability to reach across distances, is far more capable of creating and sustaining “imagined communities.” It enjoys tremendous potential, far greater than that of any other media, to sustain national identities among people who are removed from the influence of the other media.

Although just about 21.3% of the global population has access to the internet ([google.com/public data](http://google.com/public_data), online), the argument on the efficacy of the internet is made in the context of the current trend of mass migration to the West. Expatriates in general acquire the requisite skills and facilities to access and use the internet extensively. Considering that a nation engaged in conflict is constrained to secure the support of people who leave its geographical boundaries, and that the people become “knowledge-seekers,” whose “information-related action is goal-oriented, purposive and conscious” (Taylor cited in Lievrouw, 2001: 17), the internet helps in the creation of a new public space. The public space, or the third place that is removed from home and office, that the internet provides may not be quite the Habermasian public sphere but is more like the “coexisting public spheres” formed by “counterpublics” (Papacharissi, 2002:11), which in the case of expatriates grow in response to their sense of social exclusion from the culture and politics of their lands. By providing information specific to their geographical nation, which is otherwise difficult to obtain in the lands that they have migrated to, the internet sites

bind the migrant emotionally to his or her nation, even while he or she has physically moved away from it. The internet thus extends individuals and small groups' ability to act by facilitating "the broader range of citizens' actions that can take place online, over the airwaves and through exposure to political messages—actions that invite involvement" (Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 358).

The internet, like other media, affects perception and thinking (McLuhan, 1964). If print emphasised vision, the internet, like television, is a visual and aural medium. However, like print, the internet still tends to rely on one's thinking being linear, sequential, regular, repeated and logical. Hayles argued that, much like how tennis players feel that the racket is an extension of their arm, experienced computer users feel the keyboard and computer screen to be an extension of themselves (1998). To groups challenging the power of the nation-state, the Net offers a tool of "propaganda and psychological warfare" (Hutchinson and Smith, 2000: 1,622). Myths, stereotypes, justification of violence, inspiring accounts of victories or retrospection of failures can all be presented comprehensively and imaginatively on the Net, without fear of persecution or censorship, at least in principle. Since the nature of the technology allows these images and accounts to remain undisturbed for a long time, their effects are likely to be more powerful and effective than when used in other media. It is in this context that the new media are believed to pose a challenge to the power of existing nation-states.

In the paragraphs below I detail the specific attributes of the internet that make it ideal for the transmission of nationalist ideologies. First, the relative ease with which a website can be hosted, compared to the complexities of publishing a newspaper or setting up a radio or television station, is one of the reasons for the Net being a significant tool for minorities and misrepresented groups. The "high level of capitalisation that restricts market entry to powerful capitalist interests" and "the large economies of scale that are an especially pronounced feature of the communications industries" are substantially reduced in cyberspace (Dahlgren, 1991: 46). The internet has speeded up the process of production of texts and images (Snyder, 1996). Given these attributes, a community that is battling misrepresentation by the popular media and is denied space/voice can counter the misrepresentation by becoming its own voice through the internet. The medium has made it possible for people with a basic knowledge of the technology to take over the tasks hitherto limited to professionals, and to decide who they want to be and how they want to be presented (Keleman and Smith, 2001: 377). Members of the audience themselves thus become the message producers (Surya, 2000: 3). The

potential of the medium to be exploited by even the nonprofessional makes it an ideal field of study to determine the “cultural nuances” on which the “political power” patterns in a nation depend (Pye, 1985: vii).

Secondly, adding potency to the medium is the fact that it is also a total communication medium. It combines within itself the features of a newspaper, radio and television. Much like a newspaper masthead the URL address, complete with the country code at the end, flags the core identity. The medium lends itself to the use of text and pictures as in a newspaper enabling construction of “artefacts and shared experience (i.e., history and language)” (Pickett, 1996: 11). Perhaps the most significant feature of the medium is the facilitation of the “interactive communication process” (Surya, 2000: 3), thus making it a dialogical. The internet makes communication between members easier and more effective, enabling “state decision-makers” and the “ruling elites” to address the “domestic bases of power” even when the members have moved out of the physical “domestic arena” (Gagnon, 1997: 136-37). As convergent media, the internet together with traditional media forms have led to what is called “remediation,” an effort by the media to “remake themselves and each other” by invoking “immediacy and hypermediacy” at the same time (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 4). The internet thus builds on the traditional media “drawing from the other medium” (McLuhan, 1964). In fact, the terminology governing the computer itself is drawn from familiar objects: file, folders, trash bin, channels, homepage, icons, explorer and navigator.

Thirdly, the internet is the only medium whose infrastructure does not follow “surface transportation routes,” which “have played an important historical role in spanning geographic distance and reinforcing the sense of the modern nation-state” (Carey and Fischer cited in Lievrouw, 2001: 12), sparking initial utopian projections.<sup>2</sup> Although governments of nation-states attempt to regulate the form and content of the medium, it must nevertheless be said that it is still a relatively free medium, theoretically providing access to all, and allowing the laws of nation-states to be bypassed. For the conflict-generated diaspora, the technology of the internet helps alleviate the anguish of being “excluded from one’s native land—‘fatherland’ or ‘motherland’—which is as cruel as to be rejected by the loved one” (Pellizzi, 1988: 14). The form and content of the internet enables one to “join communities of like-minded people” (Gauntlett, 2000: 14), to which one can escape and feel an “emotional and psychological” belonging, especially when one finds the “physically inhabitable and identifiable space” alienating (Thompson, 2001: 36), at least in its present form.