

YOUNG WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN ACTION CAPTURING THE VOICES OF MARGINALIZED WOMEN

April 22 - May 15, 2020



MEDIA EMPOWERMENT FOR A DEMOCRATIC SRI LANKA (MEND) PROGRAM

A NEWS MAGAZINE TO COMBAT MIS-INFODEMIC: YOUNG PEACE JOURNALISTS DELINEATING VITAL INFORMATION THROUGH MOJO, IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 IN SRI LANKA

PROGRAM SUMMARY

Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) and the Center for Media and Information Literacy (CMIL) jointly produced 50 daily news magazine programs on the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of the news magazine, “MediaCorps Watch” was to show how people in various parts of Sri Lanka are coping with the present situation, while providing them with vital and verified information audio-visually using smartphones as a tool.

This program was initiated as an extension of the MediaCorps Fellowship (MC) program, under which SDJF has already trained more than 100 young journalists across the country, on Mobile Journalism (Mojo). Initially, SDJF expected 20 journalists who have been trained under MediaCorps to produce news updates and stories for the daily news magazine in both Sinhala and Tamil languages, including (i) Daily updates (ii) Coping mechanisms at the village level (iii) Human interest stories and, (iv) Stories of hope and success in managing the coronavirus. However, SDJF ended up with 59 Fellows from

19 districts contributing to around 265 video contents, using their smartphone 100%.

The Tamil news magazines were disseminated through the national Tamil mainstream media channel, UTV, while the Sinhala magazines were disseminated through social media via Alternative Media Network Guarantee Ltd, YouTube Channel, MediaCorps Watch, iVoice YouTube channel. The programs also attracted more than 33 other social media platforms. In fact, through these various dissemination mechanisms it had reached more than 806K audience within a short span and this is undoubtedly a significant achievement of the program.

The individual stories were designed with separate frames and widely disseminated through SDJF/ iVoice Facebook pages. The reach of individual stories varied.

SNAPSHOT OF THE NEWS MAGAZINE



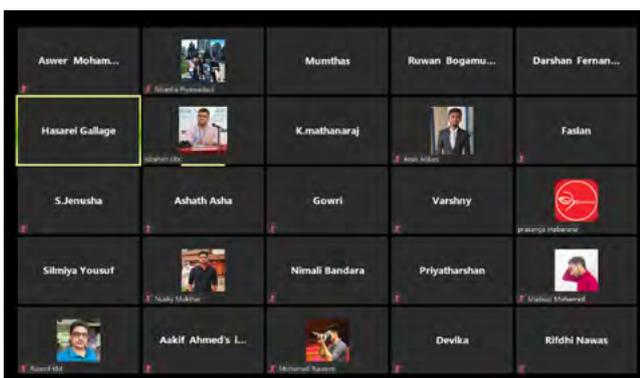
APPROACH

SDJF used two different approaches in designing the MediaCorps program as follows:

- 1. Participatory approach:** All stakeholders were consulted prior to any decision making. This eventually contributed to the success of this news magazine program. For example, SDJF and CMIL had meetings with MediaCorps Fellows, IREX and the Editorial Board.
- 2. Need based reporting:** In addition to providing space for right-based reporting, reporters in this program focused on the vulnerability of people and their needs in the changing context of the Covid-19. As such, stories that required much attention were timely reported from all over the country.

The following added value to our overall approach:

- **Trained young journalists:** MediaCorps Watch program is for the citizen by the citizen. SDJF called for an open invitation to all the MC Fellows, to interact and make good use of what they learned from MC training. These Fellows were well trained under the MediaCorps Fellowship program on Mobile Journalism (Mojo).
- **Use of smartphone:** All the news and stories in this program were in the form of videos made using smartphones. The Mojo approach has made journalistic video productions more affordable, flexible and fast.
- **Focusing marginalized groups:** Fellows were able to cover stories from all over the county and it gave a voice to the voiceless, capturing the voices of marginalized communities, given the fact that these stories were not reported hitherto by the mainstream media.
- **Island wide coverage:** One of the special features in this program is the island-wide reporting, where it covered stories from North, South, Central, North East and rest of the areas (19 out of 25 districts), where the access was limited for mainstream media during this pandemic.
- **Focusing on vital information and countering mis-information:** The special feature of the program is to provide vital information to the media consumer related to Covid 19, in the meantime, countering fake news, mis-information about COVID-19.
- **Capacity building of young journalists:** Fellows who contributed to this program were fortunate to receive two capacity building programs and ongoing mentoring facilities throughout the program. A special Webinar was also conducted by Syed Nazakat, Chief Executive Director from DataLeads, India. He highlighted the importance of fact checking, and the process of identifying misinformation as a responsible journalist. Another Webinar session to improve technical capacity was conducted by SDJF.
- **Career Orientation:** Significantly, the MediaCorps Watch program encouraged the young female MC Fellow journalists and provided real life operational experience to young University Fellows studying media, building the competencies of future journalists. As a result, the participation of young female journalists was higher in this program.
- **Professionalism:** The MediaCorps Watch program received many stories from across the country. In view of maintaining the quality of the stories broadcasted, the panel of editors reviewed the stories, during 35 editorial board meetings. A tool designed by SDJF was used to assess the quality of the stories and news updates. After selecting and lining up the stories, they were sent to the studio, where these stories go through a post-production process such as; adding narrations and translations, magazine lay-out etc. Thereafter, the magazine will be broadcasted in both languages and LIVE streamed on Facebook using a virtual mixture display through the chroma key.
- **Conflict sensitivity:** More interestingly, the MediaCorps Watch magazine was presented in both local languages, promoting reconciliation, unbiased, investigative, analytical and thoughtful commentary. The reported news carried credible information as the reporters' clarified information with authorities where necessary. Thus, the entire program was conducted by a group of young people.



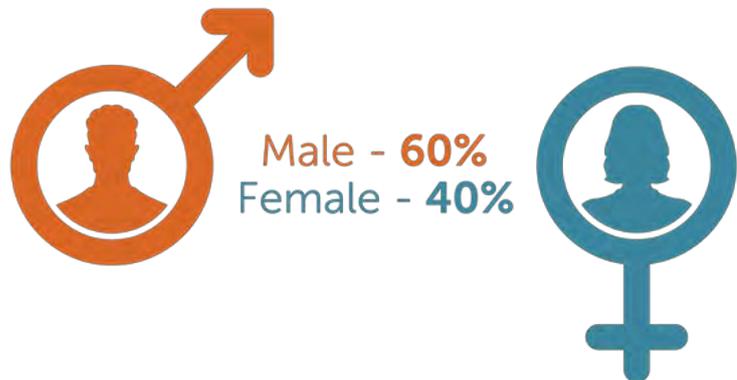
WOMEN JOURNALISTS ON THE SPOT

PROMOTING GENDER PARITY



If the mass media are not sensitive about inclusion and if marginalized groups and women are left out in their reporting during a pandemic situation such as COVID-19, it tends to replicate deeply rooted biases that can have pernicious effects on how a society responds to a crisis. On a critical note, a vigilant observer could spot that the mainstream media in Sri Lanka have been unable to provide a diverse account of perspectives, needs and voices in the society.

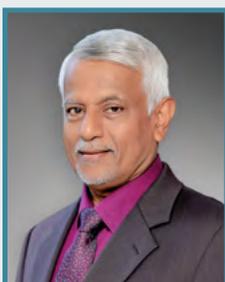
It was compelling to take into account how some of the aspiring female journalists who were trained under the MediaCorps Fellowship Program have gone beyond their comfort zones to capture significant imperatives ignored by the mainstream media. With the representation of 40% female journalists, the MediaCorps Watch program provided a unique platform for women to raise their concerns in relation to the crisis independently.



Despite potential challenges, health threats, and the complexity of the situation, it was compelling to witness how the MediaCorps female journalists were in the field to capture stories. For instance, Fathima Silmiya who lives in a high-risk area in Puttalam, was constantly reporting vexing issues in the area, such as the impact of COVID-19 on coconut cultivation and problems faced by poultry farmers in Puttalam area.

AN OPEN SPACE FOR DECISION MAKING...

The MediaCorps Watch program set up an example by providing equal space for women at decision making level. Its Editorial Board consists of 50% female representation with Nirasha Piyawadani, Hasarel Gallege and Geethma Kalhari and this program disproved the fact that “women cannot play influential roles in media”.



Prof. Padmasiri
Wanigasundera



Hasarel
Gallage



Mohamed
Azad



Geethma
Weerasuriya



Nirasha
Piyawadani



Isbahan
Sharfdeen

CAPTURING THE VOICES OF MARGINALIZED WOMEN

Amplifying voices of the marginalized women and addressing their daily struggles to make the ends meet during the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant component of the MediaCorps Watch program. In order to give these groups priority assistance, firstly the issues should be well understood. The stories about estate women in the Watawala Tea Estate and Durampitiya Estate had more than 4K views on Facebook.

Please refer the links below:

Durampitiya Estate story; <https://www.facebook.com/LDJF.org/videos/2884710531621551>

Watawala Tea Estate Story; <https://www.facebook.com/LDJF.org/videos/2884710531621551>

Both stories have addressed various issues faced by female estate workers such as their inability to go to work due to curfew rules and regulations, being deprived of ‘Samurधि’ offered by the government and the struggle to feed their families. The poignant story of a ‘Woman Rug Maker’ in Kurunegala is a clear-cut example to show how the COVID-19 lockdown has deprived them of their daily income.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Dealing with mass anxiety can leave a strong impact on those in the front line of the pandemic. It was commendable as to how Nirosha Sandamali, a MediaCorps Fellow who was stuck in Kandy, due to the prevailing curfew did an impressive story about the impact of COVID-19 on the brass industry in Kandy, whilst she was stuck, away from her usual environment. Reaching the most vulnerable segments of the community and giving a cross-sectional view of unseen truths underlying COVID-19, have been wonderfully captured by many MediaCorps female journalists. The stories about the visually impaired Sri Lankan cricket team and problems faced by women estate workers in Nuwara Eliya are lucid examples. The absence of female presenters has been apparent in the program, as a result of certain practical difficulties such as travel restrictions on account of curfew and late-night recording.

The MediaCorps Watch magazine has provided equal opportunities for both male and female journalists to report multiple dimensions of COVID-19. It has been influential in creating a wider awareness among people about the areas, which were ignored by mainstream media. The live spirit of ‘empowered women’ was remarkable as all working female journalists had the freedom to cover a story in their own ways.



Nirosha Sandamali
Kandy



Prabhasha Charithangi
Monaragala

INSPIRING BUDDING JOURNALISTS AND SUPPORTING THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The active involvement of female university students was outstanding, since they did not have prior experience of a crisis such as COVID-19. “This was one-of-a-kind experience for me because this pandemic enabled me to practically apply what I’ve learned in my Mass Communication Degree in the field. It inspired me to step into the field of journalism,” added Prabhasha Charithangi, a MediaCorps Fellow recalling her experience. While women did not traditionally cover issues such as COVID-19, MediaCorps female journalists proved that such areas are no longer the exclusive domains of men.

WOMEN PEACE JOURNALISTS



**Ahalya David
Batticaloa**



**Angela Nathan
Batticaloa**



**Devika Casiechetty
Kalutara**



**Fathima Silmiya
Puttalam**



**Gowri Bruthan
Colombo**



**K Kalarshny
Colombo**



**Kamali Dedigama
Puttalam**



**Kunthavi Sivapalan
Batticaloa**



**L Yohani
Nuwara-Eliya**



**Lakmini Wickramasingha
Kandy**



**Manushi Jayasena
Matara**



**Nadee Madushani
Hambanthota**



**Nimali Bandara
Colombo**



**Nirasha Piyawadani
Colombo**



**Nirosha Sandamali
Kandy**



**Paranitha Punitharasa
Batticaloa**



**Prabhasha Charithangi
Monaragala**



**R Prashahini
Badulla**



**S Jenusha
Batticaloa**



**Sithara Hansini
Kalutara**



**Shanika Siriwardhana
Galle**



**Sumathi Thangarasa
Jaffna**



**Vanitha Senathirajah
Vavuniya**



**W Anitha
Mannar**



**Wathsala Dissanayake
Colombo**

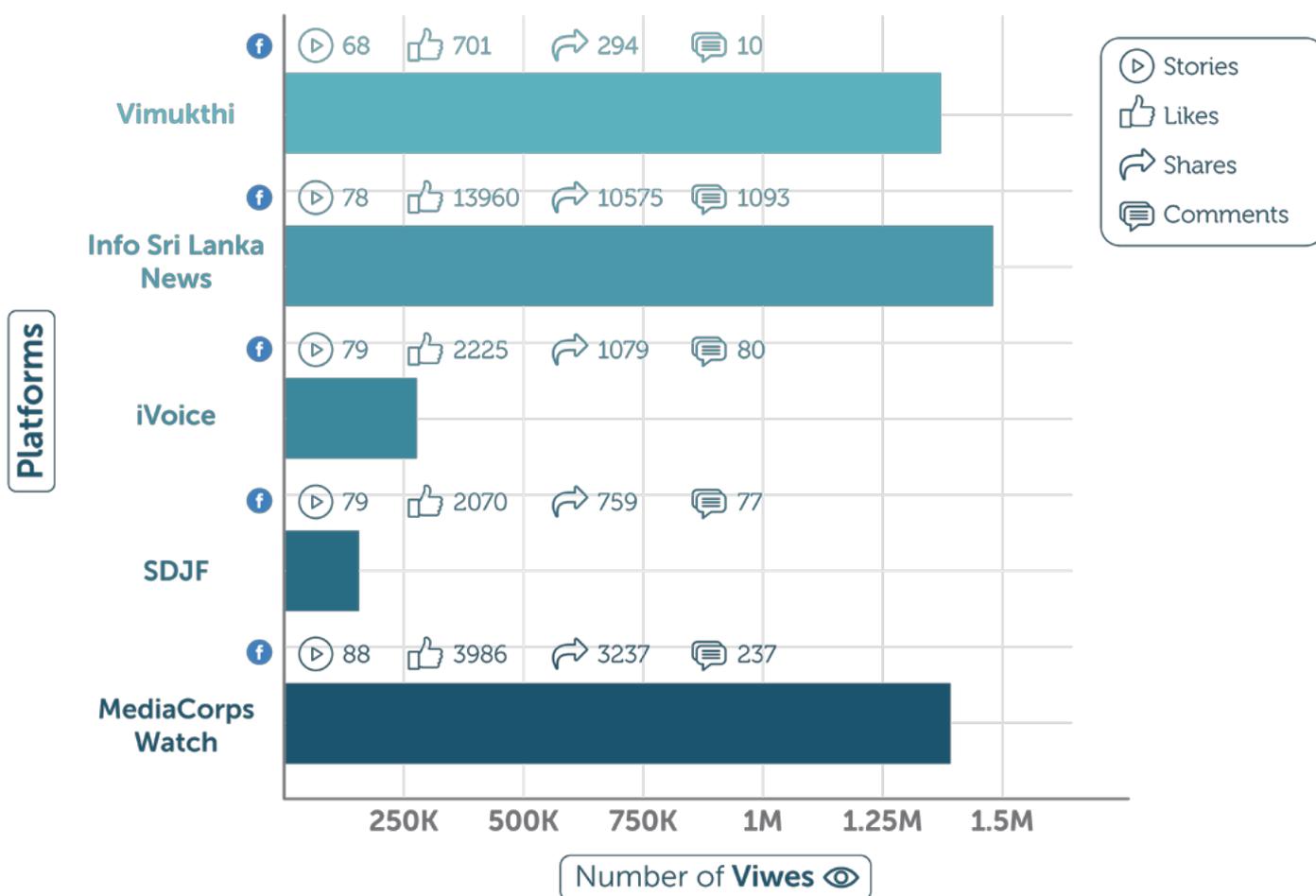
REACH OF HUMAN INTEREST STORIES AND NEWS MAGAZINE



See the link below:

<https://docs.google.com/sprea-sheets/d/18VFXVPWf8xXG8DgsJ4lbwQYS9ccRf0uCSrIb08E2ALQ/edit?usp=sharing>

STORY REACH IN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS



ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN THE REPORTING PROJECT

For almost one and a half months from March 24 to May 3, the MediaCorps Watch program has received immense enthusiasm from MediaCorps Fellows who were keen to give a voice to under-reported issues from their communities. As a result, the program received a large number of impactful, human-interest stories, which one could never have known from the conventional media platforms. These stories cover a wide range of topics starting from regular updates from around the country on the situation of a given region during the COVID-19 pandemic to capture more complex issues such as how the pandemic has had an impact on the usual life styles of people, and most importantly its impact on the economy.

For instance, the program significantly brought to light, among other things, the impact of the pandemic on small and medium scale industries such as limestone, cinnamon, tourism, wood carving, fisheries, agriculture, brassware to name a few. There were also comprehensive feature stories on issues of greater concern to the general public such as on reopening of schools and universities, public transport and about the people trapped in Colombo not being able to leave for their homes.

STORY CATEGORIES IN THE PROGRAM



NEWS MAGAZINE - SOURCE OF VERIFIED INFORMATION

Since COVID-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka in early March, it demanded more factual information to counter fake news and myths related to COVID-19 that leads to panic and fear among citizens. The mainstream media did not sufficiently address myths and fake news around the Corona viral infection and information related to day-to-day life. On the other hand, the fact checking organizations such as Watchdog, Hashtag Generation, and Fact Checker have been working hard in countering fake news in isolation.

The MC Watch program acted as a bridge between fact checkers and media and thus provided verified information to the media users and general citizens through its #No-fake segment. In addition to this, the program also invited Hashtag Generation on FB live, to talk about fake news and mis-information around COVID-19, which allowed active engagement of youth and citizens to interact with the fact checking organizations. The particular live program has received 10K views and 55 shares.

In the same way, Media Critic Mr. Nalaka Gunawardene was also invited for the FB live discussion. This discussion was also viewed by 2.3K social media users with 14 shares. The program not only provided vital information related to their day-to-day life but also significantly contributed to provide verified information around COVID-19.



IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

MediaCorps Watch program was initiated to transcend conventional media practices, which is more visible at a time of crisis as what we are witnessing now. Our goal was not only to disseminate news, which are factual and verified but also to share stories, which are not caught in the radar of the mainstream media, thereby to create awareness of such communities and issues as well, and to include their voice in the general narratives surrounding the COVID-19.

As a result, MediaCorps Watch created an impact beyond expectations, from empowering women journalists, through to inspiring the public to helping communities in need.

- 1. Participation of women journalists:** It is a widely known fact that the female proportion of journalists in Sri Lanka mainstream media remains minimal. However, the cohort of journalists of MediaCorps Watch consisted of 40% females who reported high quality stories despite the challenges they might have faced due to their gender.
- 2. Create new Job opportunities:** Most of the journalists in the program were young and budding journalists for whom the program was an opportunity to enhance their skills and to gather experience in the making of a professional journalist. The high standards set up by the program for stories of high quality, made them strive to capture the most worth telling stories in the most factual and ethical manner, thereby subtly training them to achieve the expected outcome. The talents of some MC Fellows were duly recognized, offering them opportunities to work at media stations. MC Fellow Mohamed Shabeer was recruited as a provincial reporter for Swarnawahini and MC Fellow Ahallya David is likely to get an opportunity in the Tamil channel as a newsreader.
- 3. Wider dissemination of stories uncaptured by mainstream media:** While mainstream media gave much prominence to issues of political importance, MediaCorps Watch captured stories from diverse communities, addressing multiple issues, which were largely sidelined by others. One notable example is a series of stories based on how COVID19 has affected many small and medium scale industries from agriculture, fisheries, tourism, export industries like cinnamon and rubber to women-led industries like handlooms. There were also several stories about marginalized communities such as resettlement communities in Jaffna, the visually impaired community and the estate community in the hill country.
- 4. Educational value of the program:** Not only did MediaCorps Watch bring about stories that are not widely spoken about, but it also created wider awareness among the general public on topics of greater importance during the COVID-19. The Expert Interview segment was dedicated to connect the audience with experts of different fields who spoke about a diverse range of topics including spread of fake news on COVID19, media literacy and ethics, legal aspects of the privacy of COVID-19 patients and the impact of indefinite curfew on reduced environmental pollution. The expert interview segment on medical viewpoints on the cremation of the COVID-19 death attracted a significant reception of 38.7K reach from the audience, as it was a topic, which resulted in much controversy, at the time.
- 5. Providing support to affected communities:** MediaCorps Watch journalists went beyond the traditional role of conventional journalism of merely reporting on issues and served as development journalists who could encourage the public to support for communities in need. The stories done on such marginalized communities attracted the attention of benevolent individuals who offered to assist these communities. There are many notable examples of such success stories.
 - In Magazine #7, MediaCorps Fellow Mohamed Shabeer reported about a marginalized village in Awissawella where around 30 families live in abject poverty surviving by doing odd jobs for a daily wage. They did not have even the basic facilities including drinking water and they were also ignored by the authorities who had even refused to give them the LKR 5000 given by the government for underprivileged families. When this story was published it had more than 23K views and it had moved many kind hearted people who contacted us offering to help this village. As a result, a former Sri Lankan lady residing in the US, Ms.Thilini Fernando and a local community service organization reached

out to give them dry rations. The Grama Sevaka who had earlier discriminated this community by refusing to give them a LKR 5000 allowance was also finally obliged to give it to them. This was a classic example of how the program gave voice to the voiceless but also made justice to a community that was deprived of it by responsible authorities.



- The story about construction site workers trapped in Colombo, without being able to go to their hometowns turned out to be a widely discussed subject. After it was telecasted in MediaCorps Watch, many other such groups who were trapped in Colombo, reached out to us and we continued to follow up with authorities about this issue. As a result, the Police took an action to register people who were trapped in Colombo in an attempt to devise a safe way to take them back home. While such action was being taken, several aid-groups provided the workers with food and medical aid. For example, a social activist Dr. Pathum Kerner personally visited the construction site workers trapped in Dehiwala and provided them with dry rations and a free medical check-up. They also received aid from Manusath Derana and from another private individual who had watched their story from our program.



- In Magazine #16, MediaCorps Fellow Manushi Jayasena reported of a shelter for visually impaired people in Kamburupitiya, Matara. This story about the visually impaired community who have been even more marginalized due to the COVID-19 moved the audience. After this story was published a philanthropist contacted us through Facebook and offered to help this care-home. The Fellow Manushi also reported that the home now had more benevolent visitors than what it used to be.
- The story of a disabled street food vendor reported by MediaCorps Fellow Ahsan Afthar in Magazine #49 also resulted in a kindhearted individual who contacted the vendor through Ahsan and donated him LKR 5000.
- Upon watching MediaCorps University Fellow Ramesh Madushanka's story on Copra industry in Magazine #45, a similar group of people engaged in small scale industries reached out to him and requested him to do a story also on their plight and create awareness about them. He had realized that MediaCorps Watch had more space for their voice which mainstream media had sidelined.

6. A platform for unique stories: Program also published some unique stories. These include the story of a bus driver who delivered dry rations from his bus, reported by MediaCopr's Fellow B. Niroshkumar in Magazine #19. The story has the highest reach of all the programs published in the program, with 236K views, 434 shares and 55 comments. The commenters had thanked the service of the man and some had even praised the program for bringing out unique stories, which are not captured by the mainstream. Similar highly received stories are that of a snake charmer in Kurunegala done by MediaCorps Fellow Ahsan Afthar in Magazine #29 (172K views), the story by MediaCorps Fellow Ahallya David in Magazine #50 about an engineer who has turned his rooftop into a well-maintained home garden (33.4K views and 575 shares). Other examples include the story of "Gas Mama" (Gas Uncle) in Magazine #5, an elderly man home delivering LP Gas to households at a time the risk of COVID-19 was at its peak. The heartwarming story of this elderly man who risked his own life to serve his customers and the thoughts he shared with us moved many to the point in sharing the video virally on Facebook and WhatsApp.

CONCLUSION

The initiative taken by SDJF and CMIL to provide vital information to the public during the crisis of COVID-19 and to combat the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation, was successfully completed with the production of 50 news magazines and 265 Mojo stories. The engagement of MediaCorps Fellows from different parts of Sri Lanka in the production of Mojo stories and in the news magazines is a remarkable achievement of this project. Herein, it is crucial to highlight the work ethics of MediaCorps Fellows in covering a range of issues related to COVID-19, ensuring the voice of the communities all over the country are heard even in the midst of a complete lockdown. The collaborative efforts of the MediaCorps Fellows, the youthful production team, and the editorial team, resulted in the wide dissemination of the news magazines and Mojo stories among the public, across mainstream media and social media marking more than 806K reach (SDJF – 256 756, iVoice – 32,222 and AMN – 517 409), within a short period.

This special project also helped the Sri Lankan communities in several ways, from ensuring the active involvement of women in producing the stories to obtaining the support of the locals to help people who are directly affected by Covid-19 related issues. The project simultaneously built the capacity of young MediaCorps Fellows by providing them with the opportunity to act as responsible journalists in a moment of crisis, thereby reporting accurate and valid information to the public. As such, SDJF and CMIL strongly believe that this project laid the foundation for responsible media reporting and accurate information dissemination in Sri Lanka during crisis situations with the involvement of the youth who will be taking over roles in the future as journalists, who are bound to strongly adhere to the media and journalism code of ethics.





MediaCorps Watch

On Covid 19 Pandemic

THE TELECASTED NEWS MAGAZINES AND STORIES CAN BE ACCESSED VIA THE BELOW LINKS

Magazine #01 | <http://tiny.cc/fw25lz>
Magazine #02 | <http://tiny.cc/5u25lz>
Magazine #03 | <http://tiny.cc/rt25lz>
Magazine #04 | <http://tiny.cc/cr25lz>
Magazine #05 | <http://tiny.cc/xe05lz>
Magazine #06 | <http://tiny.cc/ger8lz>
Magazine #07 | <http://tiny.cc/ob28lz>
Magazine #08 | <http://tiny.cc/b9ccmz>
Magazine #09 | <http://tiny.cc/7hkdmz>
Magazine #10 | <http://tiny.cc/8kpmmz>
Magazine #11 | <http://tiny.cc/li3h mz>
Magazine #12 | <http://tiny.cc/antkmz>
Magazine #13 | <http://tiny.cc/3jzmmz>
Magazine #14 | <http://tiny.cc/79frmz>
Magazine #15 | <http://tiny.cc/abgrmz>
Magazine #16 | <http://tiny.cc/u29tmz>
Magazine #17 | <http://tiny.cc/fvmwmz>
Magazine #18 | <http://tiny.cc/lIn0mz>
Magazine #19 | <http://tiny.cc/78n0mz>
Magazine #20 | <http://tiny.cc/wgt9mz>
Magazine #21 | <http://tiny.cc/k79bnz>
Magazine #22 | <http://tiny.cc/369bnz>
Magazine #23 | <http://tiny.cc/j99bnz>
Magazine #24 | <http://tiny.cc/ublgnz>
Magazine #25 | <http://tiny.cc/ih6ipz>

Magazine #26 | <http://tiny.cc/nl6ipz>
Magazine #27 | <http://tiny.cc/rn6ipz>
Magazine #28 | <http://tiny.cc/cr6ipz>
Magazine #29 | <http://tiny.cc/s26ipz>
Magazine #30 | <http://tiny.cc/436ipz>
Magazine #31 | <http://tiny.cc/g56ipz>
Magazine #32 | <http://tiny.cc/i66ipz>
Magazine #33 | <http://tiny.cc/h96ipz>
Magazine #34 | <http://tiny.cc/z96ipz>
Magazine #35 | <http://tiny.cc/ya7ipz>
Magazine #36 | <http://tiny.cc/xf7ipz>
Magazine #37 | <http://tiny.cc/4g7ipz>
Magazine #38 | <http://tiny.cc/ai7ipz>
Magazine #39 | <http://tiny.cc/gj7ipz>
Magazine #40 | <http://tiny.cc/7j7ipz>
Magazine #41 | <http://tiny.cc/xk7ipz>
Magazine #42 | <http://tiny.cc/8o7ipz>
Magazine #43 | <http://tiny.cc/9s8ipz>
Magazine #44 | <http://tiny.cc/hv8ipz>
Magazine #45 | <http://tiny.cc/lw8ipz>
Magazine #46 | <http://tiny.cc/5x8ipz>
Magazine #47 | <http://tiny.cc/tz8ipz>
Magazine #48 | <http://tiny.cc/008ipz>
Magazine #49 | <http://tiny.cc/w28ipz>
Magazine #50 | <http://tiny.cc/h48ipz>

MEDIACORPS WATCH NEWS MAGAZINE COVERAGE



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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



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