

Reporting on Port City Colombo in Sri Lankan Mainstream Media

Mangala Keerthi de Pasqual

School of International Journalism and Communication, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

Email: mkdapasqual@kln.ac.lk

How to cite this paper: de Pasqual, M. K. (2024). Reporting on Port City Colombo in Sri Lankan Mainstream Media. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 12, 122-143.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2024.121007>

Received: December 19, 2023

Accepted: March 9, 2024

Published: March 12, 2024

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Abstract

Launched in 2014, Colombo Port City is Sri Lanka's most significant foreign investment. China Harbor Engineering Company is developing it with the support of the Sri Lankan government. The Colombo Port City is a significant component of the Belt and Road Initiative, which commenced in 2013. Sri Lanka occupies a more significant role in the Belt and Road Initiative due to its positioning in the middle of the maritime Silk Road connecting the East-West. Sri Lanka has great potential to benefit from this project. However, the project suffered a severe setback for a while due to the suspension of its operations caused by Sri Lankan political issues in March 2015. After that, it recommenced its operations in September 2016. During the last nine years, it has passed many milestones. After beginning the project, local and global media have consistently reported on it. Research has revealed that the local mainstream media is more influential than global media. In this context, the research aims to study how to report on "the Port City Colombo" in the Sri Lankan Mainstream Media. Content analysis is used in this research to organize the sample and create a qualitative description of the patterns and characteristics identified in the sample. Mainly, the research intends to discover the tone (framing) of the news bulletins from Sri Lanka reporting on the port city. In this case, the nature of how to report news related to Colombo Port City was studied on television and radio main news bulletins. The Four TV channels and a radio channel were selected out of those with top-level ratings. From the start of the project on September 17, 2014, to the end of 2022, 25 days of news releases selected under the purposive sampling method were analyzed. The research concluded that the government TV channel, Derana TV Channel, Hiru TV Channel, and Neth FM Channel reported positively about the port city, and the Sirasa TV channel reported about the port city in a negative frame.

Keywords

The Port City Colombo, Sri Lankan Mainstream Electronic Media, BRI,

1. Introduction

Colombo Port City is the most significant foreign investment in Sri Lanka's history. It is being developed by China Harbor Engineering Company is developing it with the support of the Sri Lankan government. Xinhua reported that Colombo Port City is the largest project between China and Sri Lanka under the China-proposed BRI, especially the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road' (Huang, 2017). Launched in 2014, Port City Colombo is arguably the most ambitious development project in Sri Lanka's post-independence history of over 75 years. This project suffered a severe setback for a while due to the suspension of its operations caused by Sri Lankan political issues in March 2015. However, it recommenced its operations in September 2016. During the last nine years, it has passed many milestones. Sri Lanka is in a significant geopolitical location of the twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road under the BRI. Situated in the middle of the East-West Sea route, Sri Lanka has great potential to benefit from this project. The port city project was selected for this study because it is the largest project ever launched in Sri Lanka and is directly related to China-Sri Lanka relations. Meanwhile, with the commencement of this port city project and Hambantota port, the Chinese debt trap myth that was purposely fabricated and spread in the society by the media under Western influence caused a threat to the positive image of China in Sri Lankan society.

Especially during the 2015-2020 political regime, there was much political criticism and discussions over this project because it is being done as a Chinese investment. Western media and Indian media paid much attention to it. Not only the Western media reports but also the local media reports about the Port City project misled us. In such a media context, propaganda and agenda-setting are widely expanded in society.

With an understanding of the media's political functions and their influences on nations, it is possible to provide a comprehensive picture of their impacts on State and international relations. Thus, in this context explained by Kuhn, the five political functions of the media have included information provision, agenda setting, public watchdog, political mobilization, and regime legitimating (Kuhn, 2007, p. 21). Government departments, individual officials, and ministers use mass media as direct channels to explain the matter to their nations and overseas public. Therefore, the media enables the reputation to spread in the international society of a country by disseminating information that builds bridges between groups and individuals worldwide. Non-state activists and forces, such as multi-national groups and corporations in the international arena, are using media to deal with the increasing importance of the international political economy. BRI is a new international context. The port city being built under it is

a project with geopolitical potential. The international media was interested in it. Meanwhile, positive and negative frames on the Port City project are being created in the media. Furthermore, there has been broad and significant media coverage of the Port City project by both international and local media. However, there needs to be more academic or empirical research on the impact of the local media context.

In such a situation, the impact of local media on “the port city Colombo” was studied. In this study, it was possible to raise an experimental approach to media policies and the influence of media in Sri Lanka on BRI. Media reporting of international relations can be used as a yardstick to sustain Sri Lanka’s foreign policy. So far, there has been no study of media reporting related to projects in Sri Lanka regarding the BRI initiative. In this context, it was possible to gain a theoretical understanding of how local media influence international relations. Mainly, this research intends to discover framing strategies applied by the news bulletins from Sri Lanka reporting on the port city. Thus, this study is supposed to depict Sino-Sri Lanka relations accordingly to rate negative and positive frames published in the Sri Lankan media. One of the study’s objectives is to examine how Sri Lanka’s media policies on “the port city” are projected in the electronic media. Finally, the study explores how the selected media framed the strategic reporting process on the port city.

2. Literature Review

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping first presented it, the BRI has increased visibility in the global media (Mitić, 2017). Several scholars have investigated the effects, perceptions, and framed countries. Kironská and Turcsányi (Kironská & Turcsányi, 2017) argue that while the neutral image is prevalent, China is yet, to some extent, negatively framed in the Slovak media. The study about Mapping China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Albanian has taken an initial step toward understanding China’s BRI image covered in the Albanian online news contexts (Sylaj, 2020). However, they show an increasing trend of the BRI mentioned in TV, radio, print, and online media and that the overall perception of BRI cooperation is positively framed (Sylaj, 2020).

As the International media coverage grows, so does its scholarly investigation. Leading newspapers of Nigeria, Malaysia, and Vietnam are displayed in the analysis that there is a framed and communicated multi-national project to their various audiences six years after Xi’s announcement (Anunne et al., 2019). In a study on the place of BRI in China’s profile in international politics and diplomacy, Huang (2018) found that the media framed it in a manner that has helped to improve China’s image in India and Pakistan by avoiding minimizing expressions that invoke scepticism (Anunne et al., 2019). Tran (Tran, 2018), in one such study, found that the media framed the BRI as mutually exclusive to China and her partners. The study, which focused on Radio China International and Voice of Vietnam, observed that while the Chinese broadcaster framed BRI as

China's effort to promote regional integration, the Voice of Vietnam framed the Initiative as having considerable potential for the Vietnamese economy. Similarly, Tai (Tai, 2018) examined the different lenses through which BRI is viewed. This included the media narrative and concluded that the media had reported it with optimism in many instances. News media is essential in strengthening diplomatic relations or friendships between countries. As such, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) symbolizes diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and China. Hence, when dealing with diplomatic relations, the question of how the media portrays the messages of their countries' communities is the primary concern of this study.

In studying the reporting of BRI in Sri Lankan media, according to Jayasinghe (Jayasinghe, 2023), Wijeya newspapers have published more articles than the government media as a private ownership media. It is another specialty that it has been found that articles published in English media newspapers are more than Sinhala articles. Research has revealed that there are many articles based on events. His research shows that most of the articles are based on unofficial sources. (Jayasinghe, 2023) In this study by Jayasinghe (Jayasinghe, 2023), the framework was identified and not subjected to content analysis. He has used for analysis two government English and Sinhala language newspapers and two private media English and Sinhala newspapers. The BRI studies in Sri Lanka have yet to directly target the relationship between the port city and the media.

Nevertheless, among the BRI projects currently underway in Sri Lanka, the most influential is the Port City project. Jayarathne (Jayasinghe, 2023) says the local Government TV Channels reported the positive side of the BRI projects and about China. However, there are a few private channels which were against the local government in Sri Lanka, and they try to negatively influence the Sri Lankans about China and its relationship with Sri Lanka. However, instead of the political vision and the connection of the BRI project, the media reporting about Chinese culture is fascinating to the local audience. Further, the foreign news telecasting in local media channels has been explained about China daily with its special news.

Examining the theoretical background of research papers that have been reviewed, it is evident that agenda-setting theory (Yang & Van Gorp, 2021) and framing theory (Valkenburg et al., 1999) have been widely used. The news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that, for most citizens, is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann, 1921, p 21). People not only acquire information about social issues from the news media but also learn what importance to attach to a topic based on the emphasis of the news (Mccombs, 2002). Later researchers also demonstrate that media discourse interacts with public opinion, though individuals will, to some extent, construct their understanding of the issue (Goffman, 1974). Entman (Entman, 1993) stresses that news frames help journalists develop priorities for information regarding what seems to be relevant and

newsworthy, thereby creating agendas.

The news frame mainly includes text contents such as the presentation mode, some keywords, phraseology, news source, news schema structure and so on. However, the framework of the news report can be presented through syntactic structure, script structure, thematic structure, and rhetorical structure (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), and the emphasis of the speaker when narrating or discussing a particular news event or topic (Nelson et al., 1997), reveal the idea of the construction of new metaphor, the news media leads to different thinking and perceptions through different frames (Schlesinger & Lau, 2000).

3. Material and Methods

Content analysis is used in this research to organize the sample and create a qualitative description of the patterns and characteristics identified in the sample. This study will examine news sources from mainstream electronic media. Mainstream news bulletins are the most widespread news media production on TV and radio. In this research, qualitative Content analysis is used to study TV news and radio news in Sri Lanka. The qualitative content analysis examines the relationship between the text and its would-be audience meaning, recognizing that media texts are open to multiple different meanings to different readers and trying to determine the would-be meaning of texts to audiences. It pays attention to audience, media, and contextual factors, not simply the text.

3.1. Channel Selecting

This study will examine news sources from mainstream electronic media. Mainstream news bulletins are the most widespread form of news media production on TV and radio. For this study, the news bulletin of 5 mainstream electronic media channels in Sri Lanka (four television Channels and one radio Channel) was analyzed. According to the Sri Lanka Media Audience Study 2019 report published by <https://www.mediasupport.org/>, television is the most widely used regular source of news and current information and the most preferred and trusted news media according to the public. As many as 96% said that they regularly watch television for news (almost all of them through the TV receiver at home, with only 3% stating that they watch on a smartphone or tablet). The radio comes in second place (55%) as a source of news. Most (96%) among those who use the radio as a source of news said that they turn on the radio receiver at home, while very few do so through other methods, e.g., through a smartphone (3%) and shared listening in public places (2%). Although listening to car radio was among the answers prompted, a statistically insignificant number chose it (Sri Lanka Media Audience Study 2019 report). These channels were selected as per the LANKA Market Research Bureau (LMRB) Report 2021 and considered the media ownership report in 2018 published by Verité Research. Verité Research is a private think tank that provides strategic analysis for Asia. Its main research divisions are economics, politics, law, and media. According to the media ownership report, 77% of the TV Audience is concentrated on the top 4

companies. The concentrated listenership of the top 4 companies is 74%.

TV and radio channels' Audience concentration of Media Ownership in Sri Lanka is presented in **Table 1**. Source—LANKA Market Research Bureau (LMRB) Report 2021 and media ownership report in 2018 published by Verité Research.

3.2. Case Selection—Port City Colombo

On September 17, 2014, from the date of laying the foundation stone for the construction of Colombo Port City under the BRI project, the temporary suspension of the construction of the Colombo Port City project, its resumption, the signing of the new agreement, the completion of land reclamation, the expansion of the territory of Sri Lanka, the hearing of the Port City Commissions Bill petitions, the passage of the bill in Parliament, etc. were considered.

Case selection of the port city of Colombo is presented in **Table 2**.

3.3. Sampling

For this study, the news bulletins of 5 mainstream electronic media channels in

Table 1. TV and radio channels audience concentration of media ownership in Sri Lanka.

Ownership	TV		Radio	
	Channel	%	Channel	%
Powerhouse Limited	Derana TV	19	FM Derana	14.3
Asia Broadcasting Corporation (Pvt.) Limited (ABC)	Hiru TV	18.6	Hiru FM	10.3
MBC Networks (Pvt.) Limited	Sirasa TV	11.1	Sirasa FM	12.2
Government of Sri Lanka	ITN	10.8	ITN FM	0.69
ASSET Radio Broadcasting (Pvt.) Limited (Only Radio)			Neth FM	12.7

Table 2. Case selection of the port city of Colombo.

date	incident
20140917	the Initiating the port city Colombo
20150306	the temporary suspension of the construction of the Colombo Port City project
20160812	the signing of the new agreement
20190116	the completion of land reclamation
20191207	the expansion of the territory of Sri Lanka
2019/10/10	The winning global project award
20201217	The signing of the first investment agreement
20210418	the hearing of the Port City Commissions Bill petitions
20210520	the passage of the bill in Parliament
20220110	Opening for the public

Sri Lanka (four television Channels and one radio Channel) were analyzed. Major news releases of 25 days by those five channels were analyzed. On 17 September 2014, from the date of laying the foundation stone for the construction of the Colombo Port City under the BRI project, the temporary suspension of the construction of the Colombo Port City project, its resumption, signing of the new agreement, completion of land reclamation, adding to the territory of Sri Lanka, hearing of petitions of Port City Commissions Bill, the passage of the Act in Parliament, etc. were taken into consideration. News coverage of 25 days by the five channels was analyzed, including 10 days on the above mentioned which such events occurred and fifteen random days on which each channel reported news quoted “the Colombo Port City”. Headlines, quotes, personal statements, data reports, narratives created by the media, photographs, videos, or graphics, language use, nature of sources, and manner of presenting data and information were considered content.

4. Results and Discussion

Sri Lanka’s mainstream electronic media channels had the most news about the port city in April 2021. The reason for this was that it was the time that the petition hearing on the Port City Commission Act was held. Apart from that, most of the news was broadcast in May 2021, when the parliamentary debate on the Bill was held and when the ruling government announced in March 2015 that the port city development would be suspended. Considering these factors, ten specific days were selected. In addition, another 15 days were purposely selected. Those dates are selected from the dates on which the news was broadcast about the port city on each channel. Similar news is also found in the 15 purposely selected news stories when considering each channel. On some days, individual news, as well as several news are collected, and news is presented as a news cluster. Looking at overall, Sirasa TV’s reporting tendency is negative. At the same time, other Channels are positive, reflecting support, praise, and affirmation of the “Port City Colombo” Initiative and China’s overall appearance and building a good relationship. (See **Table 3**)

Table 3. Numbers and percentages of the tone of news of each channel.

	Positive (n)	%	Negative(n)	%	Neutral(n)	%
Sirasa	7	28%	15	60%	3	12%
Derana TV	22	88%	2	8%	1	4%
Hiru TV	20	80%	4	16%	1	4%
ITN	24	96%	0	0%	1	4%
Neth FM	20	72%	5	20%	2	8%
total	93		26		8	
mean	18.6		5.2		1.6	
SD	6.69328		5.80517		0.89	

Table 3 shows numbers and percentages of the tone of news on each channel.

Numbers of the tone of news for each channel are presented in **Figure 1**.

The news content about the port city was analyzed under five main parts. They are listed below. 1) Selection and editing of Personal statements 2) News narratives 3) Special phrases 4) Use of graphics and 3D animation 5) quoting foreign sources.

4.1. Selection and Editing of Personal Statements

Personal statements were the most contributing content of news about the port city in the news bulletins that aired during the 25 days selected. There are cases where individual statements are reported as news, as well as news made up of many individual statements. When considering personal statements, people can be divided into several categories based on their nature. The classification was done as politicians, subject experts, opinion leaders, the public, foreign representatives, and others. The category “Other” refers to pressure groups and various non-governmental organizations.

The statements used primarily on the news are those of politicians. There is something special about it. That is, the politicians of the ruling party have a positive attitude toward the port city as well as toward China. Most opposition politicians have a negative attitude, and the media has done it according to an agenda while selecting and editing the statements. For example, consider the main news bulletin on 18.04.2021, which is the date before the commencement of the petition hearing on the Port City Commission Bill. Below are how the media channels have selected and edited the personal statements for the news related to the port city. **Table 4** shows nature of selecting and editing of political statements by each channel on 18/04/2021.

Nature of Selected and edited political statements for each channel is presented in **Figure 2**.

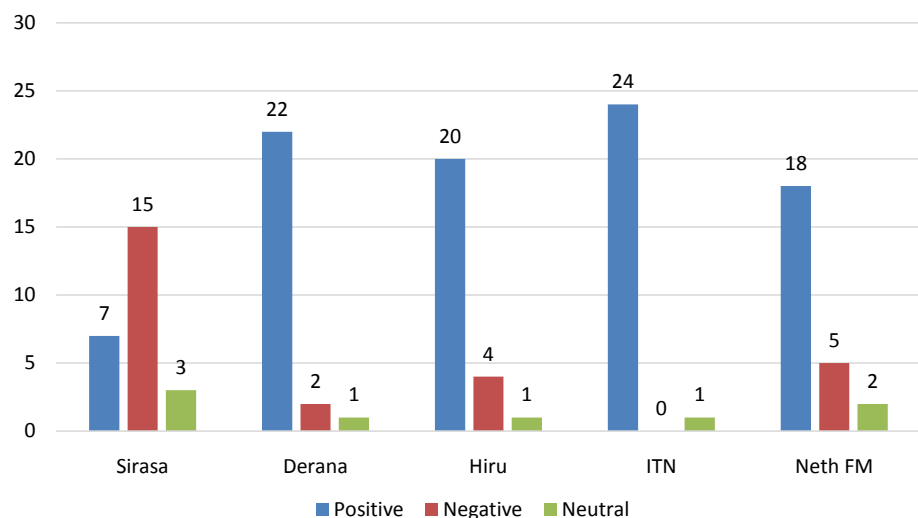


Figure 1. Numbers of the tone of news for each channel.

Table 4. Nature of selecting and editing of political statements by each channel on 18/04/2021.

Selected person	Sirasa TV	Derana TV	Hiru TV	Government TV channel (ITN)	Neth FM (Radio)
Ali Sabri (Member of Parliament and Foreign Minister)	P	P	P	P	P
Keheliya Rambukwella (Member of Parliament, Health Minister)			P	O	P
Namal Rajapaksa (Member of Parliament, Former Minister)			P		
Rohitha Abeygunawardena (Member of Parliament, Port Minister)			P	P	
Ajith Nivard Cabral (Member of Parliament, Former Minister)			P	P	P
Shehan Semasinghe (Member of Parliament, Minister of State)				P	
Tenuka Vidanagama (Member of Parliament, Minister of State)			P		
Jayantha Weerasinghe (Member of Parliament)	P	P		P	P
Dilan Perera (Member of Parliament)	P	P	P	P	
Sajith Premadasa (Member of Parliament, Opposition leader)	N	N	N		
S. M. Marikkar (Member of Parliament)	N	N		O	
Harsha de Silva (Member of Parliament Opposition party)	N	P	P	P	O
Sarath Fonseka (Member of Parliament Opposition party)				O	
Harshana Rajakaruna (Member of Parliament Opposition party)			N		
Luxman Kiriella (Member of Parliament Opposition party)				N	
JVP lawyer Sunil Watagala (Opposition party)	N		N		
President’s Counsel Thisath Wijegunawardena Legal Secretary S.J.B (Opposition party)	N				
Ajith P Perera (Former Member of Parliament, Former deputy minister, Opposition party)				O	
Former provincial council member Samantha Vidyaratne J.V.P (Opposition party)			N		

(P = positive, N = negative, O = other.)

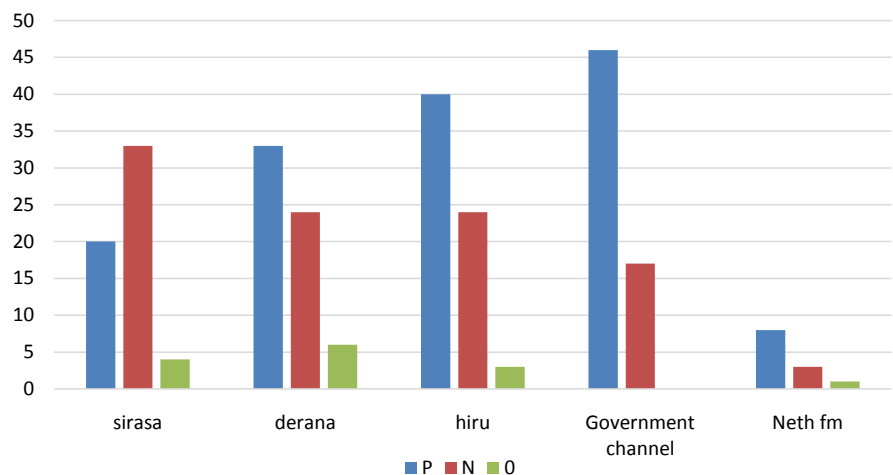


Figure 2. Nature of selected and edited political statements for each channel. (P = positive, N = negative, O = other/neutral)

This confirms that out of the selected Channels, the Sirasa TV implements an agenda to create a negative frame in selecting and editing the statements made by the politicians. The Government TV Channel and other Channels are building a positive frame.

After 2020, when considering the personal statements of the ruling party, government media, Derana TV Channel, Hiru TV, and Neth FM Channels have quoted more ministers than the Sirasa TV. Responsibility, correct information, and logic are seen in their statements. For example, the statement made by Minister Ali Sabri on 18.04.2018 can be considered. Parts of his statement in news broadcasts have mainly been used on government media and Derana TV, Hiru TV and Neth FM Channels. That statement contains many correct and logical facts. Sirasa TV ignored those facts. Instead, only questioning of deficiencies is seen on the Sirasa TV. For example, below are some important statements that were broadcast on each channel that were not broadcast on the Sirasa TV. (See **Appendix 1**) This reveals that the Sirasa TV needs to pay more attention to the essential points contained in the individual statements about the port city compared to other Channels. The Sirasa TV has a higher tendency to select opposition politicians compared to other Channels. It was observed that the political statements made by the opposition politicians were irresponsible. Being anti-government has also had an impact on it.

On 06.03.2015, before the official announcement of the government to stop the port city project, the Sirasa TV published news that created a negative impression of the port city. The statements of the politicians of the ruling party, the statements of civil activists, the statements of famous leaders and the statements of the ordinary people have been quoted. It was in a context where the good governance government at that time had announced that it would suspend the port city as an election promise. In 2015.02 and 2015.03, the Sirasa TV aired more statements describing the failure, irregularity, informality, and illegality of the Port City project. The Government TV Channel reported the news in favor of the government, while other Channels did not show much interest in the port city during this season. Other Channels have reported only significant events. Another critical point that can be identified in this study is that the statements made between 2015 and 20 by the leading Opposition Party politicians about the port city have yet to be quoted. During that period, the politicians of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime worked in the opposition.

The above points prove that the selection of individual statements by the respective media varies with the prevailing political context, and politicians' statements about the port city vary according to the prevailing political context.

Use of False Information Sources in Statements of Politicians

While studying the news about the port city, there are examples of the Sirasa TV presenting statements of false information without checking. On 20.05.2021, Sirasa TV aired news under the headline "Revelation regarding the operational activities of the port city" by quoting Sunil Watagala. Fact-checking sites con-

cluded that the news that CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt.) Ltd. is a company owned by Minister Ajith Nivard Cabral’s son, Chatura Cabral, which was found to be false. On 17.04.2021, 18.04.2021 and 20.04.2021, the Opposition politicians were seen making statements containing the false facts mentioned in this news. However, this news is a perfect example of reporting against media ethics without checking the facts.

The next most important factor in considering personal statements is the citation of responsible public officials and experts. Under that, the statements of government officials, lawyers, businesspeople, and university professors were considered. Here, it is observed that the subject experts have used the Sirasa TV to generate a negative meaning. Academics are used for a positive attitude by all other Channels. Among these, Port City Project Management has been quoted by Derana TV, Hiru TV and Government TV Channels. **Figure 3** shows Nature of Selected and edited experts’ statements for each channel.

Among the famous leaders who made statements on the Port City are Buddhist religious leaders quoted by Sri Lankan media. During the hearing and Parliamentary debate on the Port City Act, many news items with statements from opinion leaders have been broadcast. Catholic priests representing the fishing community in the area around Negombo have been quoted by the Sirasa TV when the port city was about to be shut down. Most of the statements of Buddhist leaders quoted by the Hiru TV Channel and the Government TV Channel are positive. Most of the Buddhist leaders quoted by Derana TV and Sirasa TV generate a negative impression. The two channels focused on the statements of more public opinion leaders at the time of the Port City Commission Bill. The Government TV Channel and Neth FM Channel have yet to make much use of public opinion leaders. **Figure 4** shows Nature of Selected and edited opinion leaders’ statements for each channel.

Sirasa TV aired the statements of ordinary people in the news, as all of them have been used to create a negative impression of the port city. When ordinary

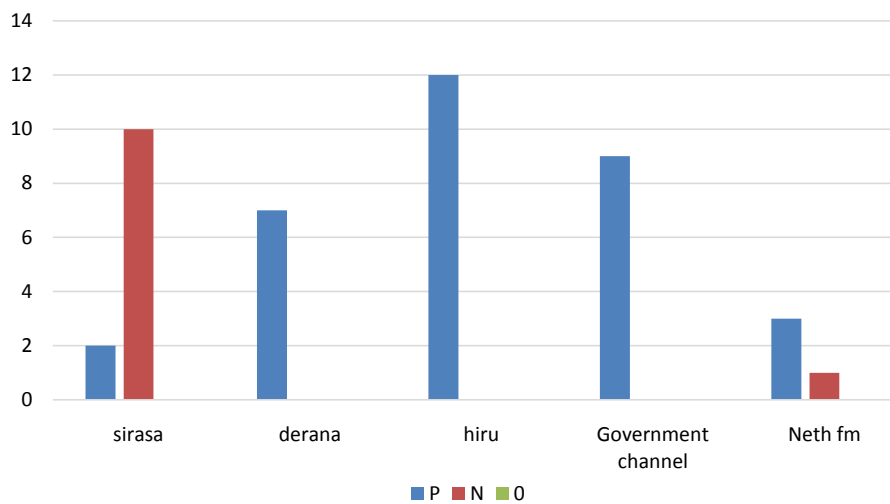


Figure 3. Nature of selected and edited experts’ statements for each channel.

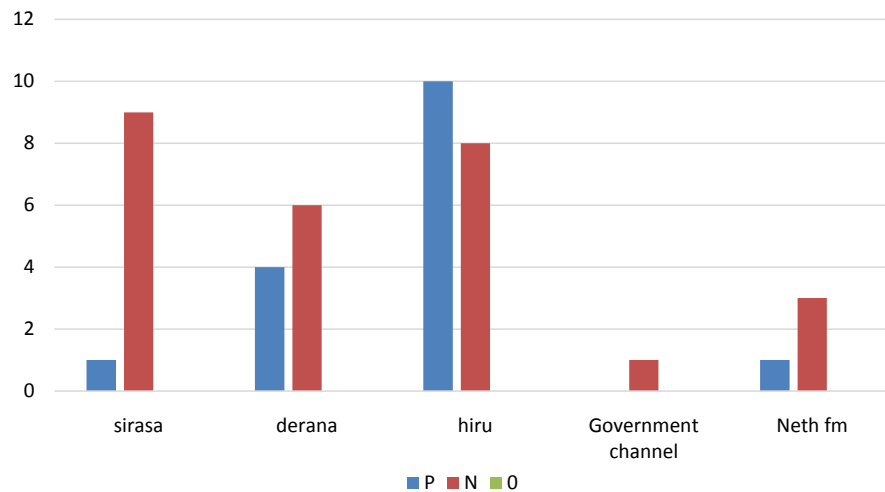


Figure 4. Nature of selected and edited opinion leaders' statements for each channel.

people use Sirasa, it is observed that they are baseless statements and statements made with political loyalty. Sirasa has used anonymous people claiming to be the public among the people so selected.

It is of particular significance that Derana TV has obtained people's opinions through more reliable and acceptable sources. For example, when a part of the port city was opened to the public, news reports quoted ordinary people. On 10.01.2022 and 17.01.2022, Derana TV reported on people visiting the port city. The Government TV Channel also reported news on 10.01.2022 and 16.01.2022 about people visiting the port city. On 10.01.2022, Hiru TV Channel and on 10.01.2022, and 20.01.2022, Neth FM reported the news, but they ignored people's opinions. Sirasa TV has not reported the news.

Among the statements of foreign representatives, Sirasa has paid more attention to the statements of Indian representatives and American representatives compared to other channels. The American ambassador's statement is a good example. Sirasa TV, on 12.04.2021, quoted the American Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Mrs. Alaina B. Teplitz, as saying there is a possibility of money laundering in the port city. There was much discussion in society about her statement. Other channels did not quote this statement. Also, the quoting of Indian representatives can be seen especially in the Sirasa TV. On 18.06.2021, "India is keeping an eye on what is happening with the security of our country," Sirasa media and Hiru TV Channel reported, quoting Sri Arindam Bagjee, spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. The other channel did not report this statement. There needs to be more needs to be more quoting Chinese representatives in every channel. There have been cases where Sirasa TV has quoted Chinese representatives, and instead of quoting the statements directly, they have reported them by quoting Chinese media.

The other category includes Civil organizations, non-governmental organizations, and interest groups. Compared to other Channels, Sirasa TV has quoted negative statements about the port city made by various civil organizations and

non-governmental organizations in its news bulletins.

Finally, regarding the selection and editing of individual statements, it is observed that they are framed under the following themes in **Table 5**.

4.2. News Narrative and Headlines

Sirasa Television has shown more interest in generating a negative attitude through the news narrative or the news script. Government TV Channel Hiru TV and Derana TV Channel have tried to build a positive attitude through their news scripts. Neth FM Channel has not paid much attention to the narrative, but the headlines are more favorable. When reporting news about the port city, the Derana TV Channel used the ON TOPIC feature, a famous news feature of the

Table 5. Selecting and editing of personal statements.

	Main points	contents
positive	Special phrases	the turning point of our country's development, resurgent Sri Lanka, the future turning point, the gateway to South Asia, the main source of income of the future Sri Lanka, and the heart of the economy
	credibility	Using the experts, ministers, and port city administrative
	Using the reliable resources and fact and figures	Quoting the Central Bank reports, port city commission Bill
	Mentioning the Values, our needs, and benefits of port city	Statements of Ali Sabri, (Hiru TV, Derana TV, Government TV Channel Neth FM) Kassapa Senarath (Hiru TV Derana TV Government TV Channel) Thulsi Aluwihare (Derana TV) Dr. Rohan Samarajeewa (Hiru TV)
	Using the Responsible person	Quoting the Foreign Minister, Prime Minister, President, Port Minister, Port City Commission Members Chinese President's statement
negative	False information and misleading information	News of the Issue of Chinese debt trap, News of Cabral's son and news of the Entebbe airport
	Incredibility and political loyalty	Statement of Opposition Parties
	Special phrases	Port City is a colony, a Chinese empire, a separate State, a Chinese State with a separate governance system like Hong Kong, a slave country, economic terrorism, economic separatism, a money laundering Centre, a place where black money is laundered, Chinese debt trap etc.
	Irresponsibility	Statements about Chinese debt trap issue, statement of MP Ranil Wickremasinghe, MP Anura Kumara
	Quoting the unconfirmed Western resources	Quoting the Harvard University research report, New York Times reports, American senate report, the statement of American Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Mrs. Alaina B. Toeplitz
	Editing statements	Statements of Dr. Harsha de silva
	Reporting the personal matter	Statements of Marikkar, Sarath Fonseka vs MP Wijedasa Rajapaksa and Sarath Fonseka vs PM Mahinda Rajapaksa
neutral	Only Covering the event	Ran Bhumi rally campaign sponsored by port city in 2015 May, delegation of Chinese foreign minister
	Political statement	Statement of Opposition parties and interest groups

channel. This feature will be presented with drone cameras, port landscape views, dialogues with the port city management, graphic designs, and 3D animations about the port city. Hiru TV Channel has also used similar news features in reporting on the port city. The narrative of the news broadcast on the Sirasa TV is often written in a fear-mongering manner. It also shows baseless claims, irresponsible statements, and the use of wrong sources. Negative headlines have been used. A new feature on 08.03.2015 headlined “Operation Anti-Corruption” reported news related to the halting of the Port City project. Government media and other media have written the narrative so that the benefits and values of the port city project are highlighted. Appropriate headlines are used to feed the narrative. **Table 6** and **Table 7** below show some examples of news narratives related to the port city on the Sirasa TV and other Channels.

Table 6. News narratives relevant to the port city on the Sirasa TV channel.

Narrative title	date	channel	tone
A conflict of opinion between the Chinese company, the Port City Commission and the President’s Secretary.	18.10.2021.	Sirasa TV	Negative
Colombo shaking due to the construction of the port city.	02.11.2017.	Sirasa TV	Negative
Myanmar reduces Chinese debt by taking Sri Lanka as a lesson.	02.08.2018.	Sirasa TV	Negative
A US Senate report that Sri Lanka is an example of the Chinese debt trap.	05.09.2018.	Sirasa TV	Negative
Sri Lanka is caught in the Chinese debt trap.	06.09.2018.	Sirasa TV	Negative
Will Sri Lanka also fall into the Chinese water hostage trap?	23.03.2021.	Sirasa TV	Negative
Is the port city of Colombo 100% owned by us?	01.04.2021.	Sirasa TV	Negative
India is wary of the port city project.	29.05.2021.	Sirasa TV	Neutral

Table 7. News narratives relevant to the port city on the other channels.

Narrative title	date	channel	tone
The port city is full of people...	17.01.2022.	Derana TV	Positive
The port city opens to the public	10.01.2022.	Derana TV	Positive
269 new hectares in Sri Lanka from today	07.12.2019.	Derana TV	Positive
Signing the first investment agreement in Colombo Port City	17.12.2020.	Derana TV	Positive
Colombo Harbor City Project Company will go to CHOGM this year...	17.06.2022.	Derana TV	Positive
The construction work of Colombo Port City has resumed.	25.06.2020.	Government TV Channel	Positive
The One Belt One Road program has been highly praised at the international level	21.11.2021.	Government TV Channel	Positive
The people of this country are not charged to enter the port city.	05.03.2022.	Neth FM	Positive
Plans to generate electricity from garbage in the port city	29.04.2017.	Neth FM	Positive
Port City pedestrian lane and light craft yard to public from today	10.01.2022.	Neth FM	Positive
Port City pedestrian lane and light craft yard to public from today	31.07.2021.	Neth FM	Positive
An agreement between China and Sri Lanka on the port city	07.01.2016.	HIRU TV	Positive

The main point from examining this news is that the narratives built by the Sirasa TV are negative, while the other Channels build narratives with a positive frame. An example of news framed negatively is the news that “China will take hostage our water resource”, which was broadcast on Sirasa TV on 23.03.2021 with the application of a water hostage trap. The news narrative is as follows.

“What is likely to happen behind these projects that are proposed to be carried out, putting a world heritage at risk? Through China’s BRI, a few regional countries’ road, air, and sea transportation projects are being implemented. In our country, Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City are also parts of this project. By BRI, China is exerting not only its economic, political, and social influence, but water is also now being affected by this. A research report published by the Harvard Institute of International Studies on their website shows that China is holding South and Southeast Asian countries hostage regarding water. Prof. Patrick Mendes and Dr. Antonina Luszykiewicz compiled this research report. It shows that China is already building dams across the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, and Mekong rivers, starting from the Tibet Valley, and collecting water. It is stated that by this, they have been able to collect water as per their need and release it only at the time they need. Due to this practice in China, the people in the lower areas of those rivers are at risk of losing water, and if they need water, they must get it from China. Through this process, the people of the South and Southeast Asian countries, where half of the world’s population lives, are being captured, according to the research report published by the Harvard Institute of International Studies. The report referred to this process as the Chinese Water Hostage Trap. Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have already reached this situation, and India is gradually getting caught in the same trap. Is Sri Lanka gradually getting caught in the Chinese water hostage trap? This news caused great fear and grave concern to Sri Lankans. We are already in China’s electricity hostage trap. A Chinese company built the Norochchole coal-fired power plant which supplies most of the country’s electricity. Even today, its repairs and operations are carried out by the Chinese. On many occasions, the power supply by this power plant was interrupted and the environmental damage caused by coal is also very immense. Is this situation going to happen with water? News First (Sirasa TV) reports on the national aspirations of the country.”

From this narrative, several points can be identified. That is, quoting a Western source but linking it to Sri Lanka even if it does not mention Sri Lanka. Adverse reporting has been done on other projects undertaken by China, enhancing the narrative using photo maps and graphics. A narrative is constructed by intertwining a few incidents. This news, which starts as an answer to a question asked in the Parliament about the Ging Nilwala project, was broadcast nine minutes from the total news broadcasting time of 34 minutes. That is, 25% of the broadcasting time has been allocated for that news. The abovementioned is only the last part of the news.

On 01.04.2021, under the news caption “Is the port city of Colombo 100% owned by us? The News feature called “360”, which was presented in eight minutes and forty-three seconds, had added facts such as the opinions of various people and the relationship between the Hong Kong territory and China. It further went on to say that countries, including the United States, are taking the initiative against the BRI project and mentioned the organization (Quad) formed by the joining of countries such as America, India, Japan, and Australia. Professor of Chinese language at the University of Kelaniya Ven. Nedalagamuwe Thero, who studied in China, said, “China has taken over ASEAN countries.” In this whole news, it was hinted that China will conquer Sri Lanka through the port city project.

Fake Narratives

On 06.09.2018, the news presented on Sirasa TV under the heading of Sri Lanka’s Chinese debt trap is an example of wrong statements. “Scholars, politicians, and civil activists have paid rapt attention to Chinese projects in this country from time to time. They strongly claim that Sri Lanka is caught up in a Chinese debt trap. According to the Statista website, which indicates the report sources of the famous German Institute Kiel Institute for the world economy, Chinese debt as a percentage of their national income is more than 25% in only seven countries out of one hundred countries. Djibouti, Nigeria, Congo, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Cambodia, and Maldives. According to this report, the amount of debt taken by many countries that are said to be stuck in the Chinese debt trap is less than 10%.

Moreover, these facts are also confirmed by a research report issued 2019 by the well-known American National Bureau of Economic Research on China’s Overseas Lending. This report details 50 major countries out of one hundred and fifty countries that received Chinese loans. According to that report, only the State of Djibouti has taken a Chinese loan close to the national income. Out of these 50 countries, the percentage of Chinese debt in 49 countries is less than 40% of the national income of those countries. In 36 out of 50 countries, the percentage of Chinese debt is less than 20% of their national income. That is 16 countries with less than 10% of national income. Sri Lanka is ranked 34th on this list and owes 10% of its foreign debt to China. **Figure 5** shows Foreign Debt Summary in Sri Lanka 2022.

4.3. Special Phrases

The use of memorable phrases in reporting on the Port City project can be identified as a significant factor. On Sirasa TV, many of the news have used fear-mongering terms. That fear was specially built up through terms like water life trap, Chinese debt trap, separate State, Chinese colony, another regime, political prisoner, and India on alert. Sirasa TV can be seen reporting using the term China Debt Trap as a news headline. In their statements, the Opposition politicians, concerning the port city as well as about China, used derogatory and

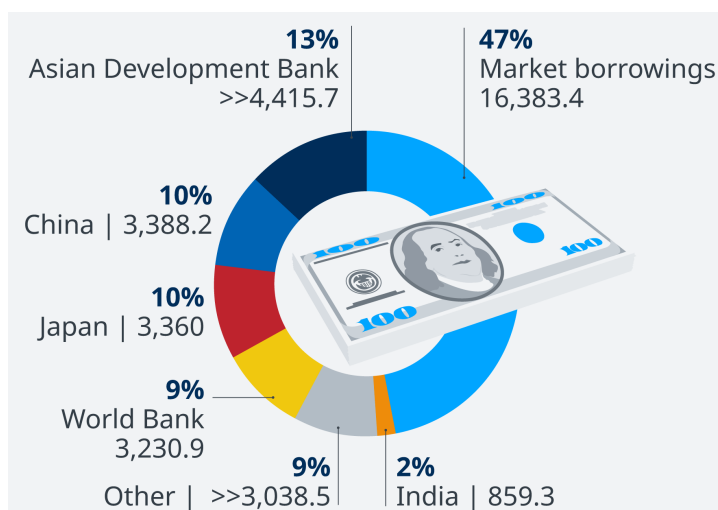


Figure 5. Foreign debt summary in Sri Lanka 2022. Source: Department of External Resources in Sri Lanka website.

pejorative terms such as “a Chinese colony”, “a Chinese empire”, “a separate State”, “a Chinese State with a separate governance system like Hong Kong”, “slave country”, “economic terrorism”, “economic separatism”, “a money laundering Centre”, “a place where black money is laundered” etc. It can be seen how practices are presented that lead to a negative attitude. The news was reported by Sirasa on 12.04.2021, under the headline that the port city is a separate State, which is a good example. There, MP Anura Kumara Disanayake declares that there is a State in the port city, and it is a Chinese colony. Among the politicians who have made statements using particular words that create such a negative impression are MP Anura Kumara Disanayake, MP Wijedasa Rajapaksa, MP Luxman Kiriella, MP Sarath Fonseka, MP Sajith Premadasa, MP S.M. Marikkar (18.04.2021) among others. Moreover, Sirasa TV has quoted many of their statements. The term Chinese debt trap is used not only in Sri Lanka but also in the Western media. It was first popularized around Hambantota port. Sirasa Media gives the most publicity among the Sri Lankan electronic media. In addition to news, programs are also presented in this regard. Former President of Maldives Mohamed Nasheed discussed the Chinese debt trap by participating in a particular discussion with Ramesh Irugalbandara of News First (Sirasa TV) on 19.05.2018. He commented on the Chinese debt trap and how countries are affected by it. In a news broadcast on Sirasa TV (05.09.2018) published with the term Chinese debt trap, American senators are quoted. However, no corresponding evidence is presented, and they are just a statement. Furthermore, it is important that it has not been reported in any other media, and the source has not been mentioned. This news has been fed by using the photos of American Senator Mike Pompeo.

Furthermore, it was reported on 14.08.2018 as “a red light from the Amnesty Organization about the seriousness of the Chinese debt trap.” On 14.08.2018, it was reported that “Kenya will also fall victim to the Chinese debt trap.” On

06.09.2018, it was reported that “Sri Lanka is caught up in the Chinese debt trap”, etc. Other media did not report the news to promote this. On 12.08.2022, Government TV Channel they are reported that China rejects the concept of the Chinese debt trap, and Derana TV reported China’s attitude towards the Chinese debt trap on 25.04.2022. Also, Derana TV TV on 28.10.2020 reported the news as a long story that “Sri Lanka is not stuck in a Chinese debt trap” by quoting the President on 04.08.2022. It is of particular significance that the mainstream media did not report Minister Ali Sabri’s statement that “the debt trap is a lie created by Western countries” at the Foreign Ministers’ Conference on East Asian Cooperation. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian had also stated that statement, and there were no reports about it in the leading media.

It is also possible to identify the use of terms that create a positive attitude in the media. Terms such as the “turning point of our country’s development”, “resurgent Sri Lanka”, “the future turning point”, “the gateway to South Asia”, “the main source of income of future Sri Lanka” and “the heart of the economy” can be identified as favorable special terms. Many of these terms are contained in individual statements. Responsible politicians such as the ruling party politicians, President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Sabri, Ports and Maritime Affairs Minister Rohitha Abeygunawardena, Minister Patali Champika Ranawaka, scholars and religious leaders have also used these terms.

4.4. Use of Photographs and Graphics in Numerical Data and Related Reports

Derana TV and Hiru TV Channels use graphics in reporting news about the port city. Sirasa TV has yet to use such exceptional graphics in its news. Derana TV Channel’s “On Topic” feature showcases the glamour of the port city using drone cameras. Sirasa TV has used photos and videos to express opposing views but has not used graphics to create positive expressions and attitudes. It is observed that using numerical data and related accepted reports, laws, ordinances, circulars, etc., by the media is generally less used. Sirasa TV cites a US Senate report and does not display the report in the news published on 05.09.2018. However, it says that there is such a report. No media cited the gazette announcement mentioned in the news, “Gazette announcement to add land belonging to Colombo Port City to Colombo Administrative District”, broadcast by Government TV Channel on 06.08.2019.

Derana TV Channel has aired the On-Topic feature presented in the main news bulletin citing the port city management, which raises awareness about the importance and benefits of the port city, which includes beautiful scenes about the port city. Sirasa TV and Hiru TV Channel quoted the American ambassador on 12.04.2021 and said that money laundering is happening in the port city. Derana TV broadcasted news with a clear positive picture of the port city through the On-Topic feature in the main news channel. On 14.11.2021 and 26.09.2021, the On-Topic feature was presented about the port city. Hiru TV Channel has

presented a similar program called the Port City Tour on 24, 25 days of April 2021. Such is the news feature presented by the Government TV Channel on 23.04.2021. Neth FM Channel is also a radio channel, but on their official website, they used a collection of photos of the port city on 20.01.2022 concerning the news that a large crowd has come to see the port city of Colombo. In the selected news bulletins of Sirasa TV, the photos, videos, or graphics of the port city were not used and would build a positive image of the port city. The best example was the news of the port city being opened to the public, which needed to be presented and reported on 10.01.2022. Also, while other Channels presented on 17.12.2019, the ceremony of land reclamation to the port city with other relevant scenes, Sirasa TV, has tried to create a mockery indirectly by presenting only the flower shooting show in its news broadcast. In 2015, while reporting the news related to the suspension of the construction of the port city, the Sirasa TV aired footage of the port city being built.

Table 8 shows the use of specific news segments about the port city.

This analysis was done through five contents. They are personal statements, news narration, use of memorable phrases, graphic and 3D animation, and use of foreign sources. Below are the main themes identified in the analysis.

4.5. Citing Foreign Sources

Another noticeable feature in publishing news about the Port City project is the citation of foreign media. Chinese international media, such as Xinhua and CGTN, are rarely quoted here. Sirasa TV quotes Indian political representatives. Additionally, instances of media quoting such as the Hindu newspaper, Al-Jazeera, Reuters and Wion can be identified. Although these media were mentioned in the news, the excerpts were not presented with evidence. For example, citing Reuters on 02.08.2010, Sirasa said, “Taking Sri Lanka as a lesson, Myanmar will reduce China’s debt”. However, it did not present a photo or data.

4.6. Summary of the Discussion

The themes that can be filtered through the content make it clear that the Sirasa

Table 8. The use of specific news segments about the port city.

topic	date	channel	tone
Places that are open to the people of Colombo Port City... On topic	09.01.2022	Derana TV	Positive
The latest construction of Port City Colombo to be opened to the public... On topic	12.04.2021.	Derana TV	Positive
The experience of people visiting Colombo Port City On topic	14.11.2021.	Derana TV	Positive
What is the port city of Colombo really?	23.04.2021.	Government TV Channel	Positive
Large crowds have come to see the port city of Colombo - photos.	20.01.2022.	Neth FM	Positive
Port City' tour	24.04.2021.	Hiru TV	Positive
Everyone's attention is on the port city of Colombo	25.04.2021.	Hiru TV	Positive

Table 9. Themes represent the entire content.

Content	Themes	Tone N = negative P = positive O = neutral
1. Selection and editing of personal statements	Irresponsibility	N
	False information	N
	Political allegiance	N
	Being done according to an agenda	N
	Value, need and benefits of port city	P
2. News narratives and headlines	False information	N
	Being done according to an agenda	N
	Irresponsibility	N
3. Special phrases	Anti-China mindset	N
	Value, need and benefits of port city	P
4. Graphic and 3D animation	Value, need and benefits of port city	P
5. Foreign sources	Anti-China mindset	N
	Indian influence	N
	Western influence	N
	Lack of eastern resources	N

TV is using unethical tactics to build a negative frame, especially choosing personal statements according to a misinformation agenda, using terms that are directly and indirectly anti-Chinese, etc. and engaging in negative propaganda. The choice of statements without being examined is a unique feature that could be seen on the Hiru TV Channel concerning other Channels in its news reports about the port city. Their overall effort represents a positive framework. Among the selected Channels, the Derana TV Channel represents the most favorable situation about the port city. The charm of the port city is revealed through the news investigation of the Derana TV Channel, such as benefits and avoiding reporting of matters that lead to some national and international conflict. The Government TV Channel is reporting on the port city on the ownership factor. In other words, the information has been reported in favor of the existing government during the period of 2015-20. While Neth FM Channel is engaged in positive reporting, due to it being a Radio Channel, other unique tactics are not detectable other than the personal statements. Themes representing the entire content are presented below **Table 9**.

5. Conclusion

Analyzing the content of news about the port city in the 25 major news bulletins being considered, it appears that Sirasa TV builds a negative frame of the port city. Other Channels have reported news about the port city with a positive

frame about the port city. Sirasa TV has yet to focus on issues like international cooperation, investment promotion, employment opportunities or political diplomatic influence. They are concerned only with the political regime. Instead of reporting the benefit value, the need for and the importance of the port city, the news reports of the port city as a political project were limited to the existing political context.

Regarding the entire mainstream media, Sri Lanka's media has yet to report such things as the presence of investors and diplomats that have been reported on the Port City website. In Sri Lankan media, there is a "he said, she said" culture of quoting politicians without fact-checking. The BRI project is an initiative with a new context. However, many journalists and media organizations have not noticed this fact. In the statements of the politicians, it could not be seen that they talk about the China-Sri Lanka relationship, economic benefits to the country from the port city, and other great benefits of BRI and the port city project with good knowledge and understanding. The Government TV Channel, Derana TV Channel, Hiru TV Channel, and Neth FM Channel engage in positive reporting about the port city.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix 1

Hiru TV.	There are 2 indicators that investors in the world look at. That means we are in 99 th place when looking at the best countries to do business. That means we must come after passing 98 other countries. Also, we are in 165 th place when we go to the court process when any problem arises regarding an agreement. Therefore, a new method should be introduced to get the investor.
Neth FM	This is completely affected by Sri Lankan law, criminal law, and common law. Even now you may know that we have Arbitration Act No. 11 of 1995. Then, when two parties reach an agreement regarding a commercial agreement that they agree to, they can resolve it through arbitration without going to court, even if it is the law of the land.
Derana TV	This country cannot be built with voice cuts alone. When looking at the best countries to do business, we are in 99 th place. Investors must pass 98 other countries and come to us. We are in the 165 th place out of 180 countries when it comes to legal proceedings when any problem arises regarding the agreement.
Government TV Channel	According to Section 9 of the Act, if the land is ours, if the rights are ours, the general law of the land will apply. If it is subject to the constitution and if the problems should be resolved by courts of law how can this country happen to be someone else? This is not an opportunity to feign fear. This is the turning point in the development of our country. This turning point is indeed an occasion we should celebrate.