

# Digital Technology and Journalism as Tools for Tamil Resistance

*Thusiyan Nandakumar, MBBS  
Editorial Team, Tamil Guardian, UK*

## Background

Journalism has long been a platform for different parties in the articulation of their respective competing narratives on the island of Sri Lanka – whether in Sinhala nationalist dominated media which framed the conflict as a question of counter-terrorism or in media aligned with Tamil nationalists which spoke of a majoritarian state perpetrating a genocide. The Sri Lankan state for its part ensured that outlets were carefully restricted, while resorting to violent methods of suppression in furthering its own narrative.

Yet, throughout the armed conflict, and even beyond its end in 2009, Tamils have managed to find avenues to resist state barriers, taking advantage of digital technology, which provided a growing number of innovative tools.

## Impact of Digital technology on Tamil Resistance

The Internet and the rise of new media provided a major breakthrough. The Internet was adaptive, decentralised, easily encrypted and had low barriers to entry. Later the growth of email led to the creation of mailing lists such as the Tamil Circle. Internet chat rooms and forums, alongside news clipping services, such as TamilCanadian.com provided new spaces.

The possibility to provide journalists working on the ground with newer technology permitted their linking to the Internet, even while they were on the move. This aided the publication of articles almost continuously such as with TamilNet, whose correspondent in the final conflict zone, was equipped with a variety of digital equipment. Mobile phone footage was also key in recording crucial news, at a time when media restrictions were stringent.

After the end of the armed conflict, the Tamil diaspora in particular continued to utilise digital

technologies through various platforms. Messaging services allowed activists who may have never met in person, to network and share breaking developments. Chat applications which provide end-to-end encryption, have been mostly the messaging software of choice, as security continues to be paramount.

Social media was being used as a tool not just for project developments but also to launch campaign events themselves such as the 2013 protests across Tamil Nadu. A global platform has emerged on which news is relayed and discussed. It has ‘shifted from TamilNet to Twitter,’ remarked a Tamil journalist.

## Analysing the dynamic

Rapid innovations in technology that have become available not only allowed non-state actors to challenge the state’s narrative, but expanded the arenas of contest into new realms where those advantages were could be neutralised.

Though the Sri Lankan state may have militarily defeated the Tamil resistance on the ground, digital media has opened new spaces and provided new tools for journalists who sought to resist state oppression. The Tamil assertion that this was an ethnic conflict borne out of legitimate economic, political and cultural grievances as a result of a suppressive majoritarian state continues to be broadcast globally.

## Looking to the future

As penetration of the Internet grows through wider connectivity, the Sri Lankan state has shown it can block access to major Tamil sites. The recent anti-Muslim violence led by Sinhala Buddhist mobs for instance, led to the state blocking telephone access around the region and a social media ban across the island. Newspapers also reported that China’s Military Intelligence Division allegedly employed to assist in blocking online content.

Despite this, Tamil online presence has continued to grow. Smartphones have become almost ubiquitous in the North-East, alongside the presence of various social media platforms. As further connectivity is reached, Tamil resistance to the state has found new arenas in which to expand.

---

## Citation

Nandakumar, T. 2018. Digital Technology and Journalism as Tools for Tamil Resistance. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Tamil Nationhood and Genocide. May 5-6, Ottawa, ON. 2:59.