

# Creating Conversations: The Man Behind Maathalan

Janaka Priyantha Hewage, or Maathalan on YouTube, has opinions about everything. Janaka's style is informal and straightforward. He has a chequered past in the corporate world, abroad, and tourism. Having experienced firsthand the consequences of political affiliations and allegiance, Janaka now runs a YouTube channel with a neutral and independent approach. Speaking with Business Today, he explains that despite his past political ties, his current mission is to offer honest commentary, whether praise or criticism, guided by what he believes is right for the country. Given his political background, bouquets and brickbats are inevitable, but Janaka claims he values criticism the most, having learned over the years that having critics can be a powerful motivator.

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Janaka Priyantha Hewage, also known as Maathalan on YouTube.

**What inspired you to start the Maathalan YouTube channel, and why did you focus on political commentary?**

My journey into content creation began long before YouTube. I first discovered blogging in 2012. Until then, I had been an avid reader of two Sri Lankan blogs—Taboo Subjects and Kathandara—which I had followed since around 2007. However, I had little understanding of what a blog actually was. The gentleman behind Kathandara explained the concept of blogging and guided me on how to start one of my own. That year, I launched my first blog under the name Maathalan, which holds a personal connection. My father was a fan of Sinhala cinema and would often take our family to the movies almost every weekend. Among the many films we watched together, Maathalan was one we particularly enjoyed. When I needed a title for my blog, that name came to me instinctively. Although people

often remark that I don't resemble the film's protagonist—a thief and an outlaw—I feel that the name somehow captures my own character and spirit of questioning. From the beginning, my blog reflected my wide-ranging interests. I wrote about history, literature, world affairs, and even dabbled in creative writing—poems, short stories, and novels. But over time, my political posts began to attract the most readers. The more attention my political commentary received, the more I focused on that area. The blog earned recognition as well. In 2015, I received the award for Best Blogger for my Nelum Yaya program, and in 2017, I was honored as the Most Popular Blogger by Etisalat. Despite this success, I wanted to explore new ways to reach people. That led me to YouTube, where the Maathalan channel was born in 2025. Although the channel is over three months old, I have produced over 150 videos. My approach to YouTube extends my blogging journey, grounded in political commentary across the divide.

**Some critics say political commentaries may indirectly promote certain political parties or agendas. How do you respond to that?**

Yes, I do face that criticism, and I understand why. Over the years, I have openly supported different politicians and political parties. My political affiliations have evolved based on the circumstances and my assessment of the country's needs at each moment. My support has shifted depending on who I felt was doing the right thing—or failing to do so. For example, between 2010 and 2015, I was strongly critical of Mahinda Rajapaksa and his government. I fearlessly expressed those views on my blog when many others hesitated to speak. That work even earned me the award for Best Blogger in 2015. Later, when the so-called “Good Governance” government began to falter, I shifted my support to Gotabaya Rajapaksa, believing he could offer a better alternative. After his victory, I received and accepted a position at Expressway Transport Company, a place I tried to resurrect, but unfortunately faced too many hurdles until its eventual closure. However, when Gotabaya was eventually ousted and Ranil Wickremesinghe became President, my focus changed again. I began campaigning for Ranil and the UNP in the lead-up to the presidential election, contributing to the “Day to Day” program highlighting their campaign. Naturally, these shifts have led to criticism and name-calling. Returning to the question, criticism is inevitable in politics and the media. I advise anyone entering these fields never to join this ring unless you are ready to face criticism. You must be willing to accept alternative views and respect that everyone has a right to their opinion. I receive my fair share of threats and insults, but have learned to ignore them and continue my work.

**Do you consider yourself aligned with any political group, or do you see your role as independent today?**

At present, I am completely independent. I no longer have formal or informal alignment with a political party or leader. Like many others, I once campaigned for Gotabaya Rajapaksa with great hope, believing he could bring meaningful change to the country; however, that did not happen. That experience taught me a valuable lesson about the risks of placing too much faith in any politician or political movement. The current government is taking actions that previous administrations could not accomplish or were not allowed to in the past 77 years. In that sense, they are breaking new ground. But this doesn't mean I give them a free pass. I remain critical when criticism is due and speak out even when it is uncomfortable. Likewise, if there is merit in the work of politicians in the opposition, I will acknowledge it without hesitation. My role is to provide honest commentary, whether praise or criticism, based on what I believe is right for the country. Although I maintain friendships with people in both government and opposition, those relationships do not influence my opinions. This freedom allows me to speak my mind, evaluate policies on their merit, and remain faithful to the independent spirit of Maathalan.

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## **What do you hope your audience gains from your videos—awareness, critical thinking, activism, or something else?**

In my view, the biggest problem in Sri Lanka is that too many people behave like slaves to a political party or a single individual. Unquestioning loyalty has become the norm. My goal with Maathalan is to break that pattern by keeping my programs neutral and independent and criticizing the government and the opposition whenever necessary. This approach isn't always popular. Hardcore supporters of particular parties or politicians often find it challenging to accept balanced commentary. Not long ago, for example, I received a voice message from a viewer living abroad who rebuked me for not supporting his favorite politician. He even declared that he would stop watching my programs altogether. But I cannot change my stance or tailor my content to satisfy a handful of people.

While some viewers possess a balanced understanding of politics, many remain deeply entrenched in party loyalties. I want to create awareness that challenges this mindset. I want my videos to encourage people to think critically, to become politically literate, and to understand the nuances of how the economy and governance truly work. This lack of political and economic literacy has real consequences. Take the example of Ranil Wickremesinghe's defeat. Many people didn't understand the economic strategies he was implementing, and as a result, they failed to see their long-term value.

Some people are uncomfortable when I address such complex topics, but I see it as necessary. Worryingly, even some of our elected representatives display very low levels of economic understanding. That is why I feel a strong responsibility to share knowledge. In fact, academics often send me their books and research, encouraging me to incorporate their findings into my programs because they believe my content can help educate the public.

## **Can you create a political discourse?**

Our role as content creators is to make people think, offer different perspectives, and gently push them toward transformation. However, to build a genuine, long-lasting discourse, we require a culture that values open discussion and critical analysis, which are unfortunately in short supply in Sri Lanka's political space. Let me draw an analogy from the local music scene. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the dominant bands in Sri Lanka mostly performed Western music. Instead of simply following that trend, Bathiya and Santhush revolutionized Sinhala music by blending

Western styles with Sinhala lyrics and rhythms. They took Sinhala music into five-star hotels and villages, creating a cultural shift that gave value and recognition to local singers. Yet even with their undeniable contribution, their influence is rarely acknowledged, mainly because of jealousy and petty competition.

This same dynamic exists in the YouTube political sphere. Content creators often operate in an environment filled with rivalry and distrust. Instead of collaborating to elevate the quality of conversation, many are more focused on outshining or discrediting each other. Viewers are also divided, often watching content to reinforce their party loyalties rather than challenge their thinking. The result is a climate where jealousy, competition, and partisan loyalty overshadow any effort to create a thoughtful, fact-based discourse.

### **Do you believe that most YouTubers' content is very divisive?**

It's not just YouTubers—it's a much broader issue. You can see the same kind of division on platforms like Facebook. Our society has deeply entrenched jealousy, and social media has only made it more visible. People are quick to attack others, often not because they disagree over ideas but because they resent someone else's success or recognition.

Through Maathalan, I have always intended to build a community of people who think critically and share a common commitment to reasoned discussion. I want to bring together viewers willing to follow a constructive path. But I also realize how difficult that is, and perhaps it's even naïve to think it's achievable in the current environment.

In my view, rebuilding Sri Lanka requires more than just conversation; it will ultimately need strong, uncompromising laws, similar to those implemented in Singapore, to bring about discipline and order. Without such a framework, the culture of jealousy, backbiting, and petty rivalries will continue to undermine progress.

I've seen this dynamic firsthand, even within the blogging and YouTube communities. When blogging was at its peak, it initially had the potential to become a powerful medium for meaningful exchange. But over time, jealousy began to poison the space. Some bloggers received awards and recognition, while others didn't, and instead of striving to improve, many who felt overlooked began attacking successful ones. The environment became toxic, and blogging as a

movement lost much of its strength and influence. That is not limited to digital media— it reflects a larger social problem in Sri Lanka. Jealousy pervades our entire social fabric, and because of it, people who genuinely deserve recognition and acknowledgment often never receive it.

Given the sensitivity of political discussions in Sri Lanka, how do you handle misinformation and fact-checking? I take a very deliberate approach to sensitive topics. I never want to comment on breaking news or trending issues. Often, when I address a subject, other YouTubers have already spoken about it, which sometimes affects my viewership. But it's more important to be accurate and fair than first. My priority is to present well-considered content.

I also maintain my independence by avoiding practices that might compromise my objectivity. I don't urge viewers to subscribe, nor do I accept advertisements. This way, I'm not bound to sponsors, political interests, or anyone who might try to influence my content. I refuse to speak on a topic simply because someone pressures me. Activists and interest groups often attempt to push their agendas, but I tell them that if they feel strongly, they should use their platforms rather than mine.

Fact-checking is central to my process. I constantly verify information, especially with friends in the legal profession, and cross-check details with acquaintances inside and outside politics. Even when sources share inside information, I remain cautious. As YouTubers, we are under constant scrutiny and at risk of legal action, so accuracy is essential. I know my content gets monitored, and while I may not be as prominently targeted as some of the more high-profile YouTubers, perhaps because jealousy has kept me from gaining the recognition I deserve, that relative anonymity works to my advantage, allowing me to stay under the radar.

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**Now you said that you study the topic you intend to speak on and that you don't get easily influenced. So, what responsibility do political YouTubers have in shaping public opinion?**

Every citizen is responsible to society, and political YouTubers are no exception. While speaking on politics, I also use my platform to address various social issues, leaving viewers to take what is meaningful and apply it in their lives. For example, I have repeatedly spoken about road safety and the need for greater discipline in driving—a critical issue in Sri Lanka, given the tragic and avoidable accidents we see far too often. Drawing from my experience in tourism, I share practical advice, such as how to drive safely on mountainous terrains with steep inclines. I've long advocated for measures like restricting tipper trucks during school hours, a regulation the government has now introduced. I also urge viewers to avoid night driving, especially in rural areas where elephants often cross the roads. I discuss topics beyond politics, such as tragic events, drug abuse, the negative influence of certain TV dramas, and even the distracting interiors of buses resembling discotheques, which make it harder for drivers to stay focused. I also critique films

and books to encourage critical thinking and cultural awareness. Over time, Maathalan has also become a space for charitable efforts. Viewers sometimes request help for donations of books or laptops. I coordinate those efforts, ensuring those who receive support are genuine cases. While I've had to reduce these appeals because of the sheer number of requests and the need to verify their authenticity, I still feature genuine causes when possible. Some viewers prefer that I separate these efforts from my main content, but I continue because I find absolute satisfaction in helping people in need.

### **What is the future of Maathalan?**

I plan to continue creating content for Maathalan for as long as possible. I may accept occasional assignments in tourism, especially if friends in the industry invite me to help with projects. However, even if I take on such work, I will continue with the Maathalan channel because I genuinely enjoy producing these videos. Some viewers encourage me to increase my output to two videos daily, as some other creators do, but I deliberately avoid that. I believe overexposure can make people lose interest. I also don't follow a strict routine that dictates when I must post. Instead, I create content only when I encounter topics requiring discussion.

My production process is simple and entirely self-managed. I record my videos on my phone, using a microphone stand that belongs to my son. I don't have a studio; I've adjusted the lighting in my space to suit my needs. I use a free software package to upload and edit my content and record and edit on my phone.

As for audience feedback, I receive both bouquets and brickbats. I value criticism the most, because those who criticize are often the ones who watch consistently. They help ensure our survival and continuation by keeping the conversation alive, even when their comments are harsh. I've learned over the years that having critics, even adversaries, can be a powerful motivator.

### **What can you tell us about yourself and your corporate journey?**

I began my career in 1985 at the Ceylinco Group, where I also met my wife. We have a son who is now employed. My first job was at Ceylinco Management and Accountancy Services under Mano Tittawella. Over the years, I worked in the computer division of The Finance and Golden Key.

In 2000, I moved overseas for work and returned in 2007 to join Ceylinco Takaful

Insurance as Manager of Key Accounts, where I excelled. Lalith Kotelawala recognized my efforts, and I was even rewarded.

Our success lay in the people we hired. Unlike today, when academic qualifications like the GCE O/L are a basic requirement, I focused on individuals with strong PR skills and natural talent, regardless of education or social background. My foreign exposure helped me identify the right personalities for the job. This approach reflected the Ceylinco culture itself. Lalith Kotelawala believed in building people up based on performance, not paper qualifications. I followed the same principle, promoting and rewarding those who proved themselves through results.

