Digital Blooms: Social Media and Violence in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The policy brief outlines key snapshots of Sri Lanka's social media landscape as it stood at the time of writing, in early August 2018, and offers some recommendations aimed at civil society's use of social media for conflict transformation.

Background Note: Primary research informing this policy brief took place between 2014-2018 as part of work conducted with the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA). Other observations arise from data analysis and further research as part of on-going doctoral studies at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (NCPACS) at the University of Otago, New Zealand.

Social Media and Violence in Sri Lanka

Social media strengthens prosocial democratic impulses as well as disturbingly destructive ones in Sri Lanka. The broad landscape of social media use and abuse in Sri Lanka, post-war (i.e. since 2009), mirrors the context in countries like Myanmar and the Philippines, and in elections or referenda held since 2015 in the US, UK, France and Germany.

1. A divided country. Sri Lanka suffered a brutal civil war for over 25 years. Post-war Sri Lanka remains a divided country, beneath the veneer of economic prosperity, relative calm, increased tourism and large-scale multi-sectoral infrastructure development.

2. A democratic deficit. An island-wide survey conducted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in 2016 paints a distressing landscape for democratic institutions and processes. Only 13.2% of Sri Lankans have a great deal of trust in the Parliament; 36.5% of Sri Lankans have no trust in the Parliament. Exactly half those polled said they trust political parties the least. In the March 2015 wave of the poll, 62.3% indicated that they trusted the Election Commission. By the February 2016 wave,

this figure had declined to 54.8%[1]. The roots of this democratic deficit lie in the lack of trust around and poor public perception of key democratic institutions.

3. The weaponization of social media, the inevitable result of a zero-sum political culture, to exacerbate socio-political division is a (long-term) strategy that is anchored in underlying socio-economic, political, religious and identity based tensions that have grown for decades in the country. The end of the war in Sri Lanka has done little or nothing to address what gave rise to the violent conflict. Today, violent content on social media is often the digital manifestation of longer-standing communal fears, anxieties and concerns. These socio-political tensions have now metastasised into short-form video, memes and tweets produced by and for a young demographic.

4. Social media is not the source of violent conflict. On social media as well as in real-world inter-actions, racism may be the path of least resistance to anxieties, fears and tensions between communities that are more economic in nature, or existential and personal. An uneven, unequal access to resources and other grievances around economics, especially in commerce and industry, leads to jealousies and other emotions that eventually, through visible, easily accessible, frictionless paths provided by nefarious actors on social media, find expression in a mob mentality and overt racism. The result is that racism grows and is seen as a root cause, when in fact, its genesis and growth is enmeshed in more complex socio-economic realities in specific geographies, which predate social media. These complex digital interactions are locally rooted in physical, kinetic relations. At the same time, the affordances of social media allow for content to be seen by audiences who are geographically dispersed.

5. Social media platforms provided a channel to incite hate and mob violence against Muslims in Digana, Kandy, in March 2018. The weaponization of Twitter since at least 2015[2] and Facebook since around 2014 flag the significant power of social media to derail democratic dialogue and the negotiation of difference.

6. Facebook in Sri Lanka. Facebook, over any other social media platform or service, drives and defines political communication and conversations, largely in Sinhala. Content generation trends were studied across 465 accounts that were overtly producing and promoting content that framed Sinhalese Buddhists in exclusive, preferential and superior frames, under increasing threat by Islam and Muslims, and consequently in need of urgent and if necessary violent pushback. The pages revealed a discernible increase in the production of content, particularly in Sinhala, just before the violence in March. Though semantic and more detailed content analysis is a work in progress, simple frequency analysis indicates content from Facebook pages openly partial to, anchored around and promoting an exclusive Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, by order of magnitude pushed out more

[1] Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2016). *Democracy in Post War Sri Lanka*. Sri Lanka. April. (Accessed April 27, 2018, from http://www.cpalanka.org/democracy-in-post-war-sri-lanka-april-2016/)

[2] Hattotuwa, S., Wijeratne, Yudhanjaya, Serrato, R. M. (2018*). Weaponising 280 characters: What 200,000 tweets and 4,000 bots tell us about state of Twitter in Sri Lanka*. Centre for Policy Alternatives. April 23. (Accessed April 28, 2018, from http://www.cpalanka.org/weaponising-280-characters-what-200000-tweets-and-4000-bots-tell-us-about-state-of-twitter-in-sri-lanka/)

content than the civil society pages monitored around the same time. Furthermore, even though civil society produced content against the violence and with a view to calming communal tensions, it was hostage to echo chambers and almost entirely distinct from the loci on social media (e.g. the accounts and actors) that propagated ideas, myths and false information promoting the violence.

7. Key actants – or social media accounts – were responsible for a lot of the tweets capturing the violence, mirroring reportage of the anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama, four years prior.[3] In 2018, these key actants included some famous politicians, sportspersons like cricketers, leading journalists, citizens with no public institutional or party political affiliation as well as civic media accounts, including those the author curated or collaborated with.

8. Evidence of relatively sophisticated algorithmically-powered influence operations through fake accounts and bots can already be seen in Sri Lanka. Research conducted in early 2018 indicates on Twitter alone evidence of significant investments in the weaponisation of the platform through the generation of accounts promoting a specific political frame or ideology, friends with specific politicians retweeting only the content produced by them and, in concert, attacking those who offered critical perspectives or were from civil society[4].

9. Government leaders did not use social media to attempt to quell violence. Almost entirely missing on social media during the violence in March 2018 was content from senior government leaders aimed at quelling the violence. Incredibly, just after the rioting, the President tweeted to congratulate the Indian cricket team for winning a series. Though it was widely retweeted and liked, there was nothing comparable on his account at the height of the violence – and it stands to reason, with far greater urgency and frequency –addressing the fallout, calling for calm, appealing for law and order, combatting rumour, holding those responsible for the violence accountable, detailing what police were doing to bring the violence under control or giving political leadership and expression to ideas and voices around co-existence, tolerance, diversity and democracy. Tellingly, the Prime Minister's Twitter account was similarly silent.

10. Prosocial content framing co-existence, communal and religious harmony and non-violence, on Twitter at the height of the violence, counter-intuitively and organically (i.e. without any paid promotion) was also popular. A tweet by a well-known public commentator on the distribution of dry rations in an area affected by the violence was retweeted hundreds of times in a short span of time. Journalists who interviewed popular film stars on the violence and the need to stop it found their content going viral too. But as noted earlier, those perpetrating the violence and fuelling the hate inhabited different spaces or spheres, even on the same platforms.

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[3] Ruwanpathirana, Thyagi. (2014). *The aftermath: Aluthgama two weeks on.* Groundviews. June 30. (Accessed on 30 August 2018 at https://groundviews.org/2014/06/30/the-aftermath-aluthgama-two-weeks-on/)

[4] Hattotuwa, S., Wijeratne, Yudhanjaya, Serrato, R. M. (2018). *Weaponising 280 characters: What 200,000 tweets and 4,000 bots tell us about state of Twitter in Sri Lanka*. Centre for Policy Alternatives. April 23. (Accessed on April 28, 2018, from http://www.cpalanka.org/weaponising-280-characters-what-200000-tweets-and-4000-bots-tell-us-about-state-of-twitter-in-sri-lanka/)

11. In an unprecedented move, the government blocked access to Facebook and other leading social media services in response to violence. This was ostensibly done to stop the spread of rumours and hate speech that may have contributed to anti-Muslim riots and attacks on mosques. Research on the impact and effectiveness of this move by government clearly indicates the futility and myopia of such measures[5].

The Youth Bulge and the Electorate

12. Sri Lanka's youth bulge. The report of the last official census conducted in 2012 indicates that 23.2% of the population is between 20-34. Another 6.9% are between 35-39. Sri Lanka has what can be called a millennial bulge.[6] This segment in turn offers revealing insights into how 1st to 4th-time voters in Sri Lanka engage with political content and frames online, and by extension, how what is embryonic today will, as they age, become the norm or baseline for society writ large.

13. Digital blooms. "Digital blooms" as used in the title to this policy brief refers to the explosive growth in the number of mobile devices used to access social media in Sri Lanka after the war. It also refers to the growth of content that is only ever digital, or in other words, never intended, designed or developed for broadcast over terrestrial media or for printed distribution.

14. Youth and Social media. As in other parts of the world and particularly in the Global South, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, instant messaging and social media engagement in general by those aged between 18-34 will significantly inform and influence political communications and frames in Sri Lanka. It stands to reason that the genesis, spread and engagement with violent conflict dynamics, post-war, will also be framed by what this demographic consumes online, or is exposed to and over time, will be normalised.

15. Social media is opportunity and threat. As an increasingly networked society with an enduring democratic deficit even after the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2015, Sri Lanka's social media growth is both a vector for much that is positive and democratic, and simultaneously, is a critical risk vector that can contribute to efforts to destabilise society.

16. Nostalgia on Social media. The democratic mandate captured by the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015 failed to fully recognise the impatience over systemic reform. The inherent messiness of democracy coupled with the legacy of severe institutional decay has today resulted in unmet public expectations, most keenly felt amongst a younger demographic who voted in both the President and the Prime Minister on their promise of change. Without the experience to compare

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[5] Wijeratne, Yudhanjaya. (2018). *Kandy, Riots and Sri Lanka's Facebook Ban,* Personal Blog. March 16. Accessed on October 20, 2018 at http://yudhanjaya.com/2018/03/kandy-riots-and-sri-lankas-facebook-ban/)

[6] Bruce Horovitz. (2012). *After Gen X, Millennials, what should the next generation be called?* USA Today. March 4. (Accessed on April 27, 2018, from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/advertising/story/2012-05-03/naming-the-next-generation/54737518/1)

performance across governments and political leaders, or to acknowledge Sri Lanka's glacial pace of institutional reform, believing in the promises made by the government and then confronted with an overwhelming silence around the lack of delivery, this demographic is increasingly influenced by rhetoric on social media that holds up the past as better. Nostalgia, carefully designed and promoted, fulfils a political goal.

Media Consumption in Sri Lanka

17. Computer literacy and social media use is greatest by young, urban Sri Lankans. Computer literacy (though problematically defined[7]) in Sri Lanka in the 19-39 demographic is far more than any other age band[8]. Computer literacy in Colombo and Gampaha Districts is the highest on the island, with 48.9% and 33.4% respectively. Notable also that both districts featured the highest number of registered voters in the local government elections conducted in early February 2018[9]. Data accessible from Facebook reveals that almost all the 6 million users of the platform access it through their smartphone, and not computers. One can hypothesise that access to other social media apps and platform (e.g. Instagram, Twitter and YouTube) is also predominantly through smartphones.

18. Social media consumption and perceptions. The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in 2016 researched perceptions around and consumption of media in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. This first of its kind survey provided key insights into the ways through which the 18-34 demographic in Sri Lanka's most wired province connect to and consume content online. When breaking down the findings by age category, Facebook was the main source of news for the 18 - 24-year-old respondents. Upon receiving an interesting news article via email, 55.9% of respondents were likely to share it with others. 23.6% said that they would share it by forwarding it via email, 18.4% reported that would share it by posting the news article on social media site/s and 13.9% said that they would do both. Over 2015 alone, around 50% of the respondents to the survey said they had decided to learn more about a political or social issue because of something they read online or something they learnt through mainstream media.[10]

This is congruent with research that suggests 'social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are not used purely for entertainment or interpersonal purposes, but for political discussion as well – and that users may benefit directly or indirectly from such participation' (Halpern & Gibbs, 2012) though the same authors and others (Hodgkinson, 2008) warn that exchanging thoughts on politics

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[7] Rohan Samarajiva. (2017) *The last computer literacy survey in Sri Lanka?* LirneAsia. April 4. (Accessed on October 20, 2018 at https://lirneasia.net/2017/04/the-last-computer-literacy-survey-in-sri-lanka/)

[8] *Computer Literacy Statistics* – Sri Lanka. (2016) Department of Census and Statistics. June. (Accessed October 20, 2018 at http://www.statistics.gov.lk/education/ComputerLiteracy/ComputerLiteracy-2016Q1-Q2-final.pdf)

[9] Staff Writer. (2016). *Number of voters increase; Gampaha tops the list.* Sri Lanka News 1/Sirasa. January 27. (Accessed April 27, 2018, from https://www.newsfirst.lk/2016/01/number-of-voters-increase-gampaha-tops-the-list/)

[10] Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2016). *Consumption and Perceptions of Mainstream and Social Media in the Western Province*. January 26. (Accessed on October 20, 2018 at http://www.cpalanka.org/full-report-consumption-and-perceptions-of-mainstream-and-social-media-in-the-western-province/)

on social networking services may be superficial, not substantive in nature, which calls into question their role and relevance in animating the interlocutors to action beyond virtual interactions. The author's own preliminary work looking at audience dynamics and dispersion patterns on social media indicates that the users on Twitter aren't the same as those who use Facebook. Further, those who engage with content in Sinhala and Tamil on Facebook are also markedly different to those who access content in English. Instagram's audience, which is growing exponentially, is eating into what has traditionally been Facebook's market share, while comments and content on YouTube, freely accessible, goes to a wider audience than just those with accounts on social media.

Twitter is, in comparison to Faceboook, an elite domain, featuring content mostly in English, with heightened production during a crisis. Content produced in Sinhala on Twitter does not have the reach or influence of content on Facebook.

19. Social media blends news, gossip and entertainment. Those on social media don't always (or cannot) discern and critically differentiate between gossip sites and more credible, mainstream media sites. Gossip *is* news.

20. Sinhala language and Social media. The production of and engagement with the social media ecosystem of Sinhala news, on Twitter and Facebook, eclipses the comparable ecosystem in English. What this means is that Sinhala language content constructs frames that are distinct from English (and Tamil), mirroring on social media a deeply divided discursive landscape that mainstream media has promoted for decades. Over 2018 alone, preliminary research into the spheres of debate and content production on Instagram reveals similar patterns. There are also similar trends observable on YouTube and its comments. Of concern to both researchers and policymakers is the migration of this content and commentary to instant messaging, making it impossible to ascertain the role, relevance and reach of content.

Social Media in Politics

21. Speed, scale and scope. The root causes of ethno-political violence, discrimination, systemic racism, and the essential nature or architecture of the state that is discriminatory and partial to majoritarian rule, have found new vectors for self-promotion, expansion and divisive rhetoric through social media. This content seeding violence and hate is produced, promoted and engaged with at unprecedented speed, scale and scope.

22. Online conspiracies and campaigns. The rise of Islamophobia and the enduring struggles of communities in the North and East of the country around land, security, access to justice, accountability and reconciliation play out in Sinhalese conversational domains on social media as conspiracies, campaigns, calls or challenges entirely alien to what is natural, normal and necessary, in a postwar environment.

23. Social media and populism. Academic research suggests that social media favours populism (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), which itself is usually a vector for authoritarianism's entry, to the demise and detriment of democracy. This reading fits neatly with observable data around how former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, his sons, extended family and politicians aligned to him, have used social media to gain popularity since the incumbent government's election in 2015[11]. There is ample data-driven evidence, however, to indicate that out of power, the Rajapaksas, and Namal in particular, on social media remain more popular than any other politician or political figure. This is used to their benefit, to organically grow their online audience by using the existing user base and over time, indoctrinate this fan or follower base with political frames deeply partial to the Rajapaksas. This is working. Preliminary data collection and analysis indicates that in comparison to 26 official Facebook pages of politicians tracked by the author, including the President and PM, from July 2017 to July 2018 just 4 official pages anchored to the Rajapaksas generated around 33% of the total engagement (i.e. interactions by way of likes, shares etc).

24. Political echo chambers. In a study conducted in late August 2018 into what had been liked by the official Facebook pages of members of the Rajapaksa family (Mahinda, Gotabaya, Namal, Yoshitha, Rohitha and Shiranthi Rajapaksa), the current President, current PM, Mangala Samaraweera MP, the United National Party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, as some of the leading figures of Sri Lanka's political landscape at present, the author discovered that[12] pages belonging to the government formed an echo chamber completely distinct from pages belonging to the Rajapaksas and the Joint Opposition. A fan or follower of one would be almost completely masked from what was liked by a competing political and partisan group.

25. Social media in the Sri Lankan elections. Pioneering and irrepressible social media campaigns, anchored both to political parties as well as civil society, contributed to high election turnout in 2015. President Maithripala Sirisena was elected to office with a record turnout of 81.52% of the electorate, a total of around 15 million voters. Later in 2015, 77.66% of the electorate turned out for the Parliamentary election. The figures show a high interest in electoral processes and the exercise of franchise[13], including amongst 1st to 4th time voters, fuelled at the time by voter mobilisation drives on social media.

26. Social media and social movement protests. There is also extant, data-driven evidence to suggest that a pulsating fan base on social media does not result in participation in a real-world protest movement. In late August, Amnesty International South Asia held an unprecedented campaign around enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka and South Asia. The campaign was pegged to activities

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[11] Gunawardene, Nalaka. (2015*). Sri Lanka Parliamentary Election 2015: How did Social Media make a difference?* Groundviews. September 3. (Accessed April 27, 2018, from http://groundviews.org/2015/09/03/sri-lanka-parliamentary-election-2015-how-did-social-media-make-a-difference/

[12] Hattotuwa, Sanjana. *Digital Flowers*, (2018) Personal Bog. February 9. (Accessed 2 September 2018 at https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2018/09/02/digital-flower

[13] Country Profile: Sri Lanka. (2016). International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). (Accessed April 27, 2018, from http://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/201/)

in the real world, as well as a hashtag and related content production primarily on Twitter, as well as Facebook.

The start and zenith of the Amnesty International campaign overlapped with the longer run-up to what was initially framed as an 'invasion' of Colombo – a massive protest movement led by Namal Rajapaksa called 'Jana Balaya Colombata' (People Power to Colombo). This campaign, unsurprisingly, was highly promoted over social media, anchored to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In scope and scale, Namal Rajapaksa's campaign on social media was by order of magnitude, larger, wider and deeper than that of Amnesty International. However, social network analysis of Amnesty's campaign on Twitter alone revealed that it resonated amongst many countries, and activists within each country, despite the fact that the campaign's real-world advocacy (which involved trucks with signage and slogans driven across the island) was rooted in Sri Lanka. Although the Amnesty campaign and the Namal Rajapaksa campaign overlapped temporally, they showed no cross-fertilisation.

As I wrote to the media at the time[14],

> …those who engaged with, were part of or chose to be affiliated with one campaign, weren't part of the other… The lack of cross-pollination… suggests a disconnect between disappearances and the timbre of governance, and reciprocally, the issues raised by a protest march pegged to development, economy, socio-political and economic rights, and the concerns highlighted by a campaign on human rights violations… It gets more interesting from here, because the reader may assume that given all I've noted, the 'Jana Balaya Colombata' campaign would have vastly eclipsed the Amnesty campaign by the sheer turnout it generated, given the hype on and reach of Namal Rajapaksa's social media accounts, leave aside an eco-system of accounts aligned with him. This wasn't the case. The campaign was an utter flop, barely managing to fill a single large intersection in Colombo, and bringing out just around 50,000[15].

As I noted on the civic media platform Groundviews[16],

> The failure of Jana Balaya to live up to its hype is even more strange given the SLPP's electoral fortunes in February. One reading is that Namal Rajapaksa's digital footprint may only be that. The significant inability to get his fans and followers to come out and join a protest could be entirely independent of his enduring ability to influence or inform their political frames, in the lead up to an election or referendum. Another reading could be that the politics of rallies and protests have given way to a politics of digital dissent and witnessing, where the preferred mode of participation or engagement is primarily through smartphone or browser. This is concerning when juxtaposed with what Mahinda Deshapriya, the head of the Elections Commission, has already flagged as very low voter registration. Namal Rajapaksa must be commended for trying his best to get fans and

[14] Hattotuwa, Sanjana. *Digital Flowers*, (2018) Personal Blog. February 9. (Accessed 2 September 2018 at https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2018/09/02/digital-flower

[15] *Doing the math: The Jana Balaya rally*. (2016) Groundviews. (Accessed October 20, 2018 at https://www.facebook.com/notes/groundviews/doing-the-math-the-jana-balaya-rally/10160761731445641)

[16] Hattotuwa, Sanjana. (2018). *Jana Balaya*, Personal Blog. September 9. (Accessed September 9, 2018 at https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2018/09/09/jana-balaya)

followers out on to the streets. His inability to do so is something we should seriously reflect on more, beyond partisan frames.

27. Social media and the Constitution. Though much hyped, the debate and discussion around a new constitution is virtually dead. There is no discernible conversation, for or, tellingly, even against, on social media. Promises by the Prime Minister to leverage social media in constitutional consultations and design haven't materialised to date. It also stands to reason that spoilers will leverage the ignorance over social media to frame the new constitution in a light that is almost certain to guarantee widespread opposition.

Policy Recommendations

Measures that can be taken by the government against content inciting hate and violence[17], as well as by leading social media companies[18] respectively, are already in the public domain. Proposed below are some recommendations around what civil society can do, in light of the developments framed above. Civil society hasn't been able to get a foothold in the public consciousness of those on social media, around how the drivers of violence that endure post-war and their resolution are central to Sri Lanka's democratic potential. Tellingly, the government since 2015 has been unable and unwilling to do this too.

A. Challenge simplistic conflict analyses that blame social media. There is no easy single solution to protracted conflict and systemic discrimination. Successive governments in Sri Lanka have flagged Facebook and social media as the sole or primary progenitors of violence, ignoring the fact that government itself has done little to uphold the Rule of Law or address the root causes. Technology is an enabler for whatever an actor intends to do and the complexity of violence, its generation and transformation, should not be viewed through a single lens.

B. Recognize that basic principles of effective communication are essential, even on social media. Even if the technologies change, basic communications strategies will have enduring value and resonance. However, some traditional content strategies, framing, expression, idiom, design and aesthetics cannot compete with new forms of expression over social media, which can communicate the same vision and ideas. Civil society needs to embrace this transformation in content, in order to bring about the change it wants to see.

C. Strengthen media literacy and communications planning. A little knowledge can be very dangerous. Increased risk, exposure, unwanted scrutiny, heightened criticism, denial of service attacks

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[17] Confronting Accountability for Hate Speech in Sri Lanka: A critique of the legal framework, http://www.cpalanka.org/confronting-accountability-for-hate-speech-in-sri-lanka-a-critique-of-the-legal-framework/, Centre for Policy Alternatives

[18] Facebook responds to open letter from Sri Lankan civil society, http://www.cpalanka.org/facebook-responds-to-open-letter-from-sri-lankan-civil-society/ and Open letter to Facebook: Implement Your Own Community Standards, http://www.cpalanka.org/open-letter-to-facebook-implement-your-own-community-standards/, Centre for Policy Alternatives

on critical online infrastructure, becoming the target of bots and trolls, doxing and breaches of privacy, aside from increased challenges and barriers around messaging, content generation and promotion, can all result from haphazard and ill-advised forays into social media.

D. Build civil society capacity in social media. Human, technical and financial investment in embracing social media by civil society is still regarded as optional or peripheral to projects dealing with governance, democracy, electoral systems, accountability, reconciliation, peacebuilding and media. Until and unless study, strategic adoption, timely adaptation, and development through iteration is mainstreamed into civil society programmes and projects, bad-faith actors with a vested interest in leveraging social media to divide, decry and destroy, will continue to have the upper-hand.

E. Develop local approaches to misinformation and hate speech. Misinformation in Sri Lanka spreads fast on social media, a trend studied by the author over many years. The scope, speed and scale have increased and widened with the greater adoption of social media by millennials. This is compounded by an enduring lack of media and information literacy. It is important to study and understand what drives the worst of the hate, and also know when not to engage. Misinformation must be handled with care, and in line with robust research done globally as well as locally around how best to operationalise counter-speech, fact-checking and the debunking of rumour.

F. Contextually determine the best social media platform, message form, and language. Social media is a fluid, dynamic environment, where platform, app, device, language, age and location all play a role in how a particular issue, person, event, process, idea or institution is discussed. Knowing this, and doing the research, before producing and promoting one's own content is vital. It is also important to focus not just on English, if it is more important to debate, promote and clarify the issue in Tamil or Sinhala, which are spoken more and have very different foci and frames of reference.

G. Develop visual types of social media content. The most viral content on Facebook and Twitter is anchored to photos, memes and short form video. Facebook Live Video generates hundreds of thousands of views, and around an event like *Jana Balaya*, surges into the millions. Live coverage over Facebook is now a primary vector of news and information for a young demographic, beyond terrestrial television. Content that is emotive, anchored to slang and speech forms used in Sinhala and Tamil, geared for mobile screen dimensions, and subtitled to enable muted viewing are some of the strategies employed by the most engaged accounts on social media, particularly in Sinhala. Civil society needs to study and emulate.

H. Social media posts can make a difference even without paid "boosts." Boosting increases the reach and engagement of content by payment. In the period of study for the examples in this policy brief, none of the most viral, engaging accounts ran any boosts for their content. Facebook and Twitter now provide tools to scrutinise and verify this. In fact, boosted content may backfire, as it risks feeding into misinformation and narratives that seek to frame civil society content as Western, foreign, harmful and with a hidden agenda.

I. Design social media to harness our "better angels." The challenge for civil society and liberal democracy is to work with leading social media companies to connect with citizenry in a manner that harnesses our better angels, in order to promote – in Sri Lanka – a cohesive vision of a peace with justice, a future that acknowledges the past, a reconciliation pegged to accountability and a society that in the main, values democracy, decency and human dignity.

The Author

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