

'Social media is equally a site of dissent and repression today'

Friday 6 April 2018, by [NASREEN Gitiara](#), [RIYASAD Nahid](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2017).

Gitiara Nasreen, a professor of mass communication and journalism at the University of Dhaka, talks about the promise and perils of online activism in an undemocratic political culture and under intense state surveillance in an interview with Nahid Riyasad

New Age: Social media these days have triggered new forms of civic engagement including the emergence of citizen journalism and social media activism. Widely spoken example for it is the Shabagh movement. How do you see this transformation?

Gitiara Nasreen: It is true that Sahbagh is considered to be a milestone event in which people were mobilised through social media. However, the momentum has been there even earlier, Shahbagh movement made this form of resistance acceptable to people. Apart from Sahbagh, we have seen social media is used to incite different kinds of public support and outrage. For example, in our legal system, getting justice is a lengthy process. People often resort to social media to unite voices. Besides, this public platform is used to collect emergency blood, different kinds of donations to people in need. On the one hand, social media is minimising intimate real life interaction, on the other hand, it unites people. This platform is in fact a re-enforcer of the communication system. Even the mainstream print and electronic media is feeling the effects of social media these days; they are collecting news from online, picking issues happening there. The overall impact of the virtual world is apparent on the traditional media.

Mainstream media has three specific jobs, to inform, to educate and to entertain. We need to see that social media is doing all at once, in one form or another. Certain classes of qualified people are entitled to work in mass media, contrary to that, social media gives chance to people of all spheres to actively take part thus formulating a citizen zone. With the advancement of technology, especially mobile phones, social media has reached to most of the households in the country. Citizen journalists do not have the training and educational background of that of a journalist of mass media, this surely creates some complications. Journalistic ethics, culture and tendency are taught to the traditional journalists, citizen journalists lack that skill. A full-fledged journalist is a representative of a certain media house which ensures his/her credibility and accountability, at the same time, interest of the owner's need to be entertained; citizen journalism is devoid of these complex motives. In a nutshell, mass media news has to pass through gate keepers, editorial panel and off course ideology of that certain house. This point is important because gatekeepers ensure that only filtered news is exposed to the public which often involves in hiding the truth. In response to that, citizen journalism is an open space for people to express without any gate keeping thus creating a subversive space. Mass media is also an organisation driven by economic goals. In reality, social media is supplementary and complimentary to the mass media. Social media has directly posed a challenge to mass media, considering the popularity, accessibility and free nature of the prior one.

New Age: As contributed by regular people, authority and authenticity is often in question. In some instances, community violence against minority in Nasirnagar or Ramu was triggered by social

media posts. In these occurrences, state has been accused of using social media as a repression apparatus. How do you see these risks?

Gitiara Nasreen: Scrutinising Ramu or Nasirnagar incidents, the alleged perpetrators have turned out to be innocent victims. Even some of them do not have online literacy, they do not have the grasp of using social media. Social media is not the one to blame; rather it has been used as a tool. For example, in Ramu, social media has merely been a part of the attack. People were mobilised through mosque amplifiers, bringing truckloads of people from elsewhere all that went into the planning and execution of the attack that needed to be considered because those were parts of the violence. Agitating people through false news, systematically injecting communal hatred into other forces were at work. All that needed to be blamed; however, social media gets the attention and blame. Main factor, here, is the people who are manipulating these tools from behind the curtain. In Ramu or Nasirnagar cases, most of the accused are people in poverty. There are evidences that they are being framed. These incidents are translation of our classed mentality. Political parties and influential classes with muscle power exploit the minority, and it is nothing unfamiliar in this country. None of the cases of communal violence staged through facebook post from Ramu to Nasirnagar have been judiciously investigated, reaching trial. On the contrary, we have public protest, general people demanding justice. Rather than blaming social media, I would put the blame on the political practice and failure of the judiciary system. Social media, in this case, is not to be blamed at any cost, in any sense.

New Age: Cyber bullying or harassment in social media is no unfamiliar topic, in the majority of the cases, women are victimised. How should we address and solve this major issue of social media?

Gitiara Nasreen: Bullying is an inseparable part of social media. As I said before, our tendency to underestimate others' ideas and intolerance towards others are some of the reasons of cyber bullying. In most cases, women are the prime victims of these incidents. As mentioned earlier, social media reproduces the incidents happening in that real space, sexual violence is usually targeted to women in reality. Echoing that tradition, women are also the major victims of cyber bullying. Even though, women participation in the public spaces of our society is abundant, still, the patriarchal collective psyche of the nation is yet to affirm women's presence and participation in the public spaces. Patriarchy is still having a hard time allowing women on the public space, even if allowed, he is exposed to a violent and abusive male chauvinistic hoard of people who believe they are entitled to sexually harass her. This mentality is translated into the sphere of social media as well. Society, passively, supporting and empathetic to this kind of behaviour towards women is bound to show the reflection on social media.

We need to take two major steps in order to prevent this kind of incidents. First one would be online or cyber literacy and secondly, zero tolerance policy against these crimes. Social media activists should come forward in these cases and create public opinion against the patriarchal cyber crimes. There are many Facebook groups, who, ideologically do not tolerate sexual harassment or communally charged comments, this is obviously a big step. A group of activist reporters can be created, who will exclusively work on cyber crimes against women and report individual incidents on the social media in order to generate a public opinion as well as increase awareness. Facebook and Youtube have rules against sexual harassment and they do check the content if reported. We need to use these services more to combat these crimes. In order to make a safe zone of this public place called social media, media literacy is a must.

New Age: Social media has been taken as a platform for the freethinkers of Bangladesh to spread different branches of knowledge. However, they have triggered hatred and anger in a certain community which led to their brutal deaths. Do you think social media activism has given freethinkers a new platform? Can this media be an alternative platform for the repressed voices?

How do you see Section 57 of ICT Act in accordance to this issue?

Gitiara Nasreen: Social media has created a free space for the people, who would otherwise be unheard; they are also getting chances to express their opinion. This space, as a voice of general people, ought to echo the overall cultural-political sentiments of any region. At this very moment, intolerance is lurking everywhere and social media merely reflects that. The political culture shows that democratic practices are fading, violations of human rights are rampant, pluralities and diversities of opinion are discouraged. In general, political and cultural environment in the country is driven by masculine aggression and muscle power. The weight of this undemocratic political culture is also heavy on social media.

As I have mentioned earlier, the virtual media is a public space. State or the government has the tendency to control every space in order to maintain its supremacy; social media only falls into the category of public space. So, the state has plans, agendas and tools to control this public space too. The government, people in the authoritative position and large business bodies, all work hand in hand to manipulate this free space. In this condition, the state's endeavour to manipulate and control this public space is no surprise. In relation to this, section 57 of ICT Act should be mentioned. Every secular body and freethinkers are against this law; however, the government holds its ground on this. This law is there to suppress any dissenting voice against the authority. Cyber space is a challenging and promising space at the same time; this kind of laws is apparatus of the state to control that space. Even after a revision, Section 57 remains the same at the core. It is nothing but old wine in a new bottle.

Nahid Riyasad

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New Age

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