

Social media terraforming media landscape

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Declaration

I declare that my thesis titled “Social media terraforming media landscape”, submitted by me as per requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English is my own work. I am solely responsible for the content of this work. The research paper complies with the University rules against plagiarism. It has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University or for any publication. Lastly I have cited all the necessary sources I used for the completion of this thesis.

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Ethics Statement

Standard rules of interviews have been followed for the purpose of this thesis. I have not disclosed names of any of the participants as the interviews were conducted strictly under the promise of anonymity.

Abstract

The 21st century is defined by technological advances made by modern civilization. As every aspect of life is changing in the presence of cutting edge technology, the media landscape of the world and Bangladesh is simultaneously going through a period of change and transition. We can observe

a growing association between socio political movement and internet technology to such an extent that I have argued that the media landscape is going through a process of terraforming both globally and locally. By analyzing both global and local socio political movements, legal infrastructure, industrial infrastructure and responses from different stakeholders like journalists and regular citizens, I have tried to identify the key players of this process and its distinct features.

Keywords: Social Media, Digital Media, Internet, Politics, Media, Journalism.

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Introduction:

5 February, 2013 can be described as an important date in the history of 21st century Bangladesh as it marks the beginning of Shahbag movement. The movement began with demanding capital punishment for war criminals of 1971, later demands included banning of Jamat-e-Islam and boycott of all of the parties affiliated institution. Couple of features of this particular movement makes it stand apart from all of the other social and political movements in the history of Bangladesh. Social media, like *Facebook*, emerged as a primary platform of debate and protest organization. Supporters of the movement and those who opposed it--both sides took to facebook to express their opinion. As bloggers and online activists played the initial role of calling the protest and citizens of the country responded, news media rushed to cover the event, and largely relied on social media like Facebook to spread the news. At the same time, opposition to the protest itself was organized through Facebook pages. Numbers of Facebook pages trying to discredit the movement and allegations against the war criminals multiplied overnight. News workers, bloggers and online activists came under fire both online and offline, and the threat of bodily harm from the opposition of the movement increased. In the following days, news workers and bloggers were physically attacked. Notable Blogger Rajib Haider was murdered outside his house for speaking out against war criminals and ideology driven political party Jamat-e-Islam.

Jumping to 2018, once again Facebook and other forms of social media emerged as one of the primary platforms for the organization of road-safety protests. Citizens voluntarily organized for the protest through social media, latest updates were uploaded and shared on a minute to minute basis. As *BBC* described it, “the protest movement is almost entirely driven by young people, it’s unsurprising that social media has played a key role” (Bangladesh protests).

During this social movement, once again news workers and supporters of the movement were attacked both online and offline by the opposition of the movement. But, this time fingers pointed towards the government. Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) the student wing of the ruling party Awami League was largely blamed for the attacks on protesters and news workers. It is also to be noted that, Award winning Photojournalist and human rights activist Shahidul Alam was detained by police and charged under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act for sharing protest updates on social media and international news media.

Moving on to the Anti-rape protest of 2020, Once again news workers and online activist faced severe criticism and verbal attacks on social media for covering madrasa rape cases. Moreover, though general audience unanimously agreed on the horrid nature of rape incidents, clear divisions can be noticed among the news audiences regarding questions about which rape cases should be covered, what are the underlying deeper causes of these incidents and what could be the preventive measures.

Now, if we observe the above mentioned movements, following common features emerge regarding the media landscape of the country:

- Social Media, mainly Facebook has become a bilateral communication platform between News Media and the audience.
- In each movement, news workers were at the receiving end of the government and audience flak and social media played a key role in these incidents directly or indirectly.
- Oppositions of each movement took to social media to express their opinion regardless of historical and factual truth.

With the above mentioned features in mind we can argue that the emergence of social media as an online communication platform has profoundly affected the media world globally. This presence of a bilateral communication platform between the media houses and the audience raises the question-- How the audience are responding to social and political issues on social media and what are the driving factors behind certain type of response; and how flak from the government and audience is affecting the news construction, presentation, framing and the news agencies as a whole, what are the larger implications and what are key features.

Methodology:

This research depends on primary and qualitative data collected through interviews conducted on both media organization professionals and regular citizens. The first string of interviews saw participation from 10 news media professionals. The interview questions consisted of both multiple choice questions and questions that require descriptive answers. These questions will primarily focus on government and audience flak experienced by news workers, both online and offline.

General audiences and readers of news contents also participated in a string of interviews. 20 randomly picked readers participated in the interview. These interviews focused on how readers were reacting towards news media outlets and news workers using social media.

This study relies on three separate media and communication theories for the sake of getting a comprehensive understanding of the media world in Bangladesh and perhaps globally. Firstly, In their book '*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*', Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman introduced the Propaganda Model. Under the Propaganda Model, they identified five filters that misshape or reform the news from its original form. Out of these five filters Flak discusses the effects of negative response from the audience on the news making process. Alongside flak, the Ideological beliefs of the populace (Anti-communism) was also identified as a filter that affects news media as a whole.

On the other hand, In his book '*The effects of Mass Communication*', theorist Joseph T. Klapper proposed the Reinforcement theory and suggested that the Mass media does not have the ability to influence the audience. Klapper argued that people's behavior, belief, attitudes are likely to be influenced by their social circumstances and religious institutions, and the media is more likely to reinforce than to change regardless of the effects.

Beside these two theories, this research will rely on Cultivation theory proposed by George Gerbner in the 1960's. As part of The Cultural Indicators project, George Gerbner examined and analysed the effects of violence shown in television. Gerbner proposed that long exposure to Television violence develops a distorted world view in the minds of the viewers. The viewers assume that the world is more violent and threatening than it really is. This theory necessarily proposes that viewers' concept of social reality is altered by the reality portrayed by the television. Now this theory was proposed in the 60's when television was still a new technology and a window to the outside world for the viewers. But In the 21'st century world stricken by a pandemic, one can argue that television has been replaced by mobile phones and services like Youtube and Facebook have taken over the role of main source of information and news.

Literature review:

Propaganda Model: Herman and Chomsky defined the role of media as “a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace” (01). Herman and Chomsky argued that which news is fit for publication is decided by five filters of the Propaganda Model. “The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news "objectively" and on the basis of professional news values” (Herman and Chomsky 2). Herman and Chomsky described the constraints of these filters as so powerful and built in our fundamental system in such a way that alternative opinion or choice of news might not even be possible. Out of these five filters, Flak and Anti-communism directly addresses the issues of negative response from audiences and government and Ideological belief of the society.

“Flak refers to negative responses to a media statement or program. It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action” (Herman and Chomsky 26). Though Herman and Chomsky specifically mentioned different forms of communications, we can argue that Letters, telegrams, phone calls have largely been replaced by 21st century social media. Though the threat of legal actions still persists, the general population takes to social media to express their negative responses. Often the comment sections of Facebook page or Twitter accounts of news media are flooded by negative responses by the audience. This phenomena can particularly witnessed if we observe the audience response regarding madrasa rape cases on social media. And this prospect of negative feedback can be a very effective form of deterrent for the news workers. As Herman and Chomsky stated, “ If certain kinds of fact, position, or

program are thought likely to elicit flak, this prospect can be a deterrent” (26). Herman and Chomsky also associated this ability to produce costly and threatening flak to power.

Furthermore, Herman and Chomsky identified ideological belief as another filter of news production. In the context of the United States of America, this Ideological filter was Anti-communism. In the case of Bangladesh, the governing ideology might be different, but the inner workings and impacts of the belief held by the majority of the population mirrors the implication of ideological filters. Herman and Chomsky stated, “ideology helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies” (29). Herman and Chomsky also point out that Ideological filters can be used as “political-control mechanisms” (29). Under such a political-control system Ideological and religious belief become powerful filters and often create an ‘us vs them’ scenario, and even in the news media this point of view can become a very legitimate one.

Reinforcement Theory: In his book *The Effects of Mass Communication*, Joseph T. Klapper stated that, “persuasive mass communication functions far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change” (15). Klappers explanation of mass media effect on people is formulated around primarily sociological elements that affect people’s psyche and judgment. In his opinion, the media can not influence people to change their mind, rather it only reinforces their previously held belief. “It would be no exaggeration to say that the efficacy of mass communication in influencing existing opinions and attitudes are inversely correlated with the degree of change” (Klapper 15). Klapeer argued that, though major changes and conversions might occur due to the effects of mass media, they are rare and they might not be widespread under particular conditions.

What Klapper's reinforcement theory necessarily suggests is, mass communication is more likely to reinforce existing opinions than change them; it can produce modifications rather than conversions (18).

Cultivation Theory: George Gerbner developed cultivation theory as part of a research project called Cultural Indicators Project. The purpose of this project was to primarily explain the effects of television violence on viewers who spent a long period of time watching television.

“The cultivation hypothesis proposes that over time, heavy viewers of television develop views of the world similar to what they see on television” (Bryant and Thompson 101). Violent crimes served as the most obvious example of distortion of reality through digital media. Bryant indicated an intriguing feature of cultivation effects, As viewers with higher education tended to be less likely to have their views altered by media presentations while viewers with less education seemed more prone to this effect. “Those with higher levels of educational attainment are less likely to have their views of the world influenced by television” (Bryant and Thompson 101).

Since, the hay days of television entertainment are over and 21st century audiences rely on their smartphones and social media as their primary source of news and entertainment, the same theory and argument can be applied to the discussions regarding effects of these media.

With this theoretical background established, this study dives deep into research work done both locally and internationally to observe the holistic view and to observe the major aspects of media, population and state's triangular relationship. Kathryn Bowd's work in *Social media and news media: Building new publics or fragmenting audiences*, Bowd explores the question, whether Social media is creating a news group of audience or fragmenting the

previously existing group. In her observation “Social media present both opportunities and threats for news media, affecting their relationships with their publics and the geographical places and spaces that they have traditionally served” (129). Francesco Sobbrío takes a deeper look at this stratification in his research *The Political Economy of New Media: Challenges and Opportunities Across Democracies and Autocracies*. Sobbrío used data collected from 1984 to 2014 to analyze the decline in public trust on the parliament and the media. His works also address the issue of false news spread through social media and their implication in the political sphere.

Though Sobbrío and Bowd’s work largely concerns North American and European context in the argument; Al-Zaman, Md.Sayeed, et al provides latest data in *Social Media Rumors in Bangladesh* to observe and analyze the impact of false news spread through social media in local context. Their research finds, social media is increasingly becoming a main source of political and ideological false information campaigns in Bangladesh. Though the implications are hard to quantify or measure numerically, United States Air Force Lt Col Jared Prier provides his expert observation and research on the subject matter of how social media tools can be exploited by outside forces to influence and manipulate the internal political mechanics of a country. Lt Col Prier’s research titled *Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare*, uses the US presidential election of 2016 to explain how social media was used by Russia to influence the election process.

This thesis also takes into account the legal challenge and obstacles faced by journalists in Bangladesh; Particularly in the form of Digital Security Act 2018 and Information Security Act 2006. Along with such state-backed challenges and bindings, Bangladeshi journalists also seem to be on the receiving end of Public scrutiny. As Mubashar Hasan and Mushfique Wadud’s paper

titled *Re-Conceptualizing Safety of Journalists in Bangladesh* shows, Bangladeshi citizens have little trust in local media organizations. Rather international news media is accepted as more credible and in the case of local journalists, “now all the journalists can be bought by money” (Hasan and Wadud 32).

Chapter 1:

1.1 'In a State of Flux'

Perhaps, the biggest advantage Social Media and Digital Media by extension has, is its ability to reach audiences beyond national, political, cultural and social boundaries. While traditional media outlets are often bound by geographical and political limitations; thanks to the technological advancement of the last three decades, people are connected from all four corners of the world. This creates a unique situation for the news media. “Social media present both opportunities and threats for news media, affecting their relationships with their publics and the geographical places and spaces that they have traditionally served” (Bowd 130). Before the days of the internet, the public or audience had very limited options if they wanted to respond to news organizations. That is certainly not the case anymore. Social media often allows the readers to directly respond to media outlets. The same platforms also allows the media outlets to reach their audiences in a shorter period of time, moreover statistical databases like Google Analytics allows the media outlets to target new audiences based on information collected by these services. “they may enable news media to develop new publics and shift understandings of their relationships with place” (Bowd 130).

This new scenario creates both opportunities and challenges for news media outlets. Kathryn Bowd described the complexity of this situation as ‘a state of flux’ (131). Previously successful business models-- particularly that of print media has proven ineffective in this age of internet. “the fracturing of audiences and the widely heralded demise of print newspapers threatening the ongoing profitability — and in many cases viability — of news organisations” (Bowd 131).

At the same time, news media organizations are seeing an increase in their capacity to distribute information when relied on digital platforms. This has resulted in an increase of audience expectation, everyone wants the news ‘now’. This combination of audience demand, increase in capacity to reach more people, yet decline in profitability has created a very complex situation for new media workers.

“Nonetheless, having and maintaining a social media presence has become central to practice in newsrooms small and large. While the frequency of engagement and updating may vary widely, news outlets in the Western world which are not represented on at least one social media platform are becoming increasingly rare” (Bowd 131).

1.2 **Non-linear multidirectional information flow:**

Along with the challenging process of keeping up with modern technology, the news media’s role in the public sphere is also going through a transition. Based on Jurgen Haberman’s conceptualization of newspapers’ integral role in the public sphere, Stevenson writes, media helps “the people reflect critically upon itself and on the practices of the state” (49). Newspapers alongside television news programs often provided the raw material that contributed to the formation of public opinion, “and the media can influence the issues people think about and how they think about them” (Lee and Chyi 706).

However, this landscape is going through a significant change as “the growth of the networked environment— and particularly of social media — is impacting on understandings of the public sphere and through this the role played by news media” (Bowd 135). As the notion of ‘public sphere’ moves from town halls and public gatherings to websites and social media services on the internet, Bowd argued that it’s becoming an networked but increasingly hybrid public sphere. Since participation in this new ‘networked public sphere’ is made possible from

anywhere in the world, media ecology is going through an almost forced transition, and at the same time opening up new forms and modes of communication between the public, their representatives and news workers. Quoting Hermida, Bowd writes “Notable about these new forms of communication is the shift away from hierarchical approaches to news traditionally utilized by news media” (135). Meaning, public not only can directly communicate with whomever is sending the message, but they can also communicate and organize between themselves and react in a collective manner if they choose to. What comes out of this nonlinear communication is “a networked means of communication that alters the publishing dynamics of a media system” (Hermida 816).

This ‘networked public sphere’ is identified as “ non-linear, decentralized and multi-directional information flows” (Van Leuven et al 852). According to Hermida et al., this multidirectional flow of information is changing previously existing news dissemination processes and the fundamentals of news production as social media gets more ingrained in the whole news experience process (Hermida et al. 822). Social media in particular allows the audience to share and discuss information, contribute to the news making process, and even influence the news content in some cases. Perhaps the most important aspect of this new nonlinear information flow is that it gives the audience the power to choose. As traditional news media publications are ‘cherry picked’ by the news organization and editors, the internet and social media has certainly opened up the information traffic to the general audience. Where they can not only choose what they want to read, but also contradict, add more information, or refute the whole news story itself. Furthermore, this allows the audience to communicate and discuss issues with fellow like minded people. Nonetheless, part of the trust relationship between traditional news media outlets and audiences might have been transferred in the networked

public sphere as well'. Hermida et al. suggests that users are adding social media networks to their source of news but not completely rejecting the mainstream media outlets at the same time, due to previously held trust on these organizations (822).

1.3 **Key Players:**

“Aligning existing trust relationships with widely utilised social media platforms provides opportunities for news media to engage with their publics in a variety of ways” (Bowd 136). Among these social media networks, Facebook and Twitter perhaps hold the largest market share. While other platforms like Instagram, LinkedIn and Tiktok have a decent market share in terms of sheer user numbers, Facebook and Twitter provide the necessary digital landscape and mechanics for actions of social and political implications.

Based on data provided by Facebook authority for its investors on investor.fb.com, the platform has 2.80 billion active users as of 2020. Out of these more than 1.84 billion people use the platform almost everyday. These figures are not isolated to Facebook’s main website only. Other smaller brands like Whatsapp, Instagram and Messenger are also included in these statistics. While Facebook’s user base may seem astonishing, what is more astonishing is its advertisement revenue. Just in Q4 of 2020, Facebook made a revenue of [27.2 billion USD](#). What is more intriguing is the fact that 98.3 percent of the total users of the platform use it from mobile devices. Facebook’s accessibility from mobile devices have given it the top position in the social media market. Interestingly this same feature presents Facebook as a new challenge and an opportunity for news media outlets; as it allows these organizations to reach a greater number of audience in a very short span of time.

While Facebook holds the throne, the distance with its closest competitor Twitter can only be described as ‘humongous’. According to data provided by Businessapps, Twitter boasts

353 million active users as of Q4 of 2020. The company also made a revenue of 936 million during the third quarter of 2020, putting it well behind Facebook. Yet, as observed in the United States and other European countries, politicians seem to be leaning towards twitter as a mode of communication with the public. Furthermore, both of the platforms have been used as organizing platforms for social and political protests as seen in recent black lives matter movement, the capitol hill riot and ongoing protest against the Junta forces of Myanmar.

1.4 **Reshaping Political Activism:**

Glyn Brennan's work on how social media is reshaping political activism provides some much needed quantitative data on the matter. Based on data collected from Pew Research Center, Brennan argues that social media is playing an integral part in mass protest, social mobilization and civic engagement. Brennan's research indicates that audiences are increasingly relying on social media for political discussion, and "political discussions are more or less respectful/likely to come to a resolution/civil/focused on policy debates/politically correct/informative/angry compared with other places people might discuss politics" (76).

Moreover, politically active audiences often use social media to often show support for their preferred candidates and restrict/block/cut communication with supporters of opposing political beliefs. Many of them have changed settings "to receive fewer posts from someone because of politics" (Brennan 76). In other words, political activists on social media are not only interacting with news organizations or politicians, they are also interacting with those who support/oppose their preferred political or social issues. "Social media sites help bring new voices into the political discussion and help people get involved with issues that matter to them" (Brennan 76).

Based on a survey conducted among 2,800 individuals, 48% of the participants said they lost their temper and the discussion on social media gets angry while talking about political correctness, policy debates and civil resolutions. While 45% of the participants compared social media discussions with real life discussions and agreed that these discussions do not cause any aggressive reactions, only 7% of the participants said political discussions on social media are 'less angry' (Brennan 78).

Moreover, more than 55% of the participants acknowledged taking active participation in political activism on social media. These activism includes taking part in groups that share interest in similar political issues, local protests and rallies, using hashtags related to socio-political issues. 48%-63% of the participants said, political discussions on social media get less respectful, less civic, less politically correct and less informative (Brennan 79). Amidst all this, the percentage of people who changed their views on any particular candidate or political party remained within the threshold of 12-26%. Out of all of the 2800 participants at least 55% described themselves as highly politically engaged on social media platforms.

Brennan's research adds more complexity to a picture that is changing faster than one can adapt to it. Social media actively promotes engagement among its users. This engagement allows the users to communicate with audiences they might never come across in real life. Not only establishing new communication within the audience, the advertisement driven business model of social media companies allows politicians or anyone willing to pay for the service to use tools provided by the social media platforms to propagate their own political ideology and reach voters that might be left outside their reach otherwise. Moreover, paid promotion creates an opportunity for dissemination misinformation. Regardless, "Dynamic employment of social media for

protest-related issues is related to higher probability of citizens defending themselves from position-challenging perspectives” (Brennan 80).

1.5 **Politics Comes First: Arab Spring**

Social media’s use in political activism on a large scale was perhaps first observed during the Arab Spring. In early 2010’s anti-government movements, uprising and in some cases armed conflicts were observed during this series of incidents. It originally started in Tunisia as a response to the oppressive regime of the country and the low standard of living suffered by the citizens. Soon enough, these protests spread across the Arab world, in countries like Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Amidst these anti-government movements, riots, insurgencies and other forms of social violence were widespread. Using Arab Spring as a case study in order to understand the role of social media in collective actions against an overarching socio-political structure allows us a deeper understanding of the inner workings of these phenomena.

“The role of social media in collective action cannot be understood without first taking into account the political environment in which these media operate. The first way to demonstrate this principle is by looking at the simple correlation between the level of social media penetration and the amount of protest in the various countries”(Wolfsfeld et al. 124) .

In order to observe and understand how social media affects political movements, one must consider the penetration of social media platforms in those particular countries. Wolfsfeld noted, In absence or omission of the previously existing socio-political variables, these impacts can not be correctly measured or observed (128). Moreover, these country level comparisons can not be undermined by individual or group level differences and “Looking at the changes over time in each of these countries would probably reveal that many groups found it much easier to protest after the advent of the Internet and social media” (Wolfsfeld et al.128).

Wolfsfeld looked at the correlation between the outbreak of the protest and the rate of Facebook registrations before and after the protests. Moreover, Google search for 'Facebook' and observation of keyword search on google from different time periods of a particular nation or country provides valuable data. Based on these observations, Wolfsfeld et al. concluded that, "The fact that an increase in the availability of social media does not necessarily lead to protest should be clear from the negative correlation between the amount of media penetration and the number of protests" (Wolfsfeld et al 128). Based on Wolfsfeld et al. research it can be concluded that "the increase in Facebook registration clearly took place after the outbreak of violence in these countries, not before it" (128), drawing an intriguing connection between politics, social media and violence.

It is absolutely necessary to have a proper grasp on the political context of any country or nation before diving deep into the prospect of understanding social media's role in collective actions of the citizens. Yet, observations of these cross-border phenomena reveals another intriguing aspect of the complexity. Though individual or group level analysis of socio-political protests and their association with social media can be an effective tool to understand the inner working of society or isolated groups, "cross-national research provides a completely different perspective on this issue" (Wolfsfeld et al. 132). Whether these technological apparatus can become part of larger socio-political movements, is almost a redundant question these days. Rather, how the role of these social media varies based on contextual differences can perhaps shade more light on the complexity of the situation.

Along with contextual variables, activity of previously existing political bodies can play an integral part in the scenario by using existing technology and overtaking the initial cause or affected parties all together. As Wolfsfeld et al. notes,

“The Muslim Brotherhood had little to do with initiating the initial protests and they were probably not the most frequent users of social media. However, they did have the best political organization available and were ultimately able to win both the parliamentary and presidential elections” (132).

On the same issue Adam Smidi and Saif Shahin add new perspectives and new observations. In the case of Arab Spring, social media went beyond the boundaries of state-controlled legacy media. Social media not only gave voice to people who were suffering under an oppressive monarchy, but also contributed to the organization, mobilization, and demonstration of the protests. In many cases these protests were broadcasted all over the world through social media and gained global support. Alongside political, economic and social context methodological observation and analysis of these events answers a few important questions.

“Did social media instigate protests or did they merely facilitate them? Were they more influential in some parts of the region, or at certain points in time? How does their influence compare with other social, economic, cultural and political factors? What about the part played by traditional— now also called legacy—media, especially newspapers and television?” (Smidi and Shahin 197).

The government control over traditional media organizations certainly created a favorable atmosphere for the involvement of social media platforms. “ The Arab monarchies and military dictatorships had retained power for long by controlling the mass media and using them to manipulate public opinion” (Smidi and Shahin 198). The emergence of social media finally allowed citizens of these countries to communicate and exchange information free of state filtering. As a result, these monarchies and dictatorships lost their power to control/manipulate the citizens for their own benefits. “This fundamental change had wide-reaching effects: making

citizens better informed, turning them into activists, facilitating public organisation and collective action, and eventually helping the development of democratic institutions that could replace autocratic regimes” (Smidi and Shahin 198).

As like any cases of anti-government protests in an autocratic country, state owned media in Arab countries largely delegitimize these protests and maintained a largely pro-regime stand. In this case, social media provided an alternative solution. Social Media platforms like Facebook and Twitter became the ‘independent’ and authentic source of current affairs. “Some articles even argued that legacy media organizations, whose reporters lacked access to protesters, depended on social media to know what was going on and to even get content for their own coverage” (Smidi and Shahin 200).

A closer inspection of Egyptian Newspapers from January-February 2011 revealed more traditional or legacy media’s role during Arab Spring; “the newspapers framed the protests as a conspiracy against the Egyptian government. Reports depicted protesters as ‘delinquent and violent youth who did not have the national good at heart” (Hamdy and Gomma 198). The state controlled news media outlets largely stayed loyal to their regime, rather than the citizens of the country. “Arab media was characterized by uncertainty and ideological or sectarian divisions, which ‘created a fertile environment and eager audience for sensationalist media that fanned rumors, incited hatred against political adversaries, and fueled divisive and demonizing narratives’ (Aday, et al. 97). Traditional news media often lacked necessary manpower to cover these events live or in person. In many cases, international news media organizations relied on footage collected from social media platforms--overcoming the limited accessibility imposed by the government.

Smidi and Shahin's research shows that, "social media played a multi-pronged role in the wave of protests that came to be known as the Arab Spring" (204). Social media and video sharing platforms like Youtube created an unique mode of communication for the citizens of these countries that made them believe they have a 'say' in public affairs. Thus, their active participation in political activism in the hopes of a better/different life. These new modes of communication and information transactions helped the people to feel empowered. Moreover, these platforms gave the people a place to connect with each other, organize protests and mobilize in case of sudden incidents. Moreover, social media's global reach allowed activists to establish cross-country connections, share ideas, formulate new ideas and strategies to protest against government oppression; creating an all inclusive environment fertile for all political activists to participate directly or indirectly.

The emergence of internet based social media platforms have added more complexity to the already multifaceted relationship between media organizations, politics and citizens' reaction in response in relation to them. The effects of this sudden technological emergence and its complex impact on the state as a whole cannot be exactly quantified. But it can be argued that it has become an integral part of this multifaceted complexity.

Chapter: 2

2.1 False news and politics

“News media are key institutions of accountability. They allow citizens to be informed on politicians’ behavior and on public policy outcomes” (Sobbrio 49). Before the rise of the internet and various forms of new media surrounding this technology, On one hand, news media informed the public about state affairs, policy changes, and other world affairs. On the other hand, news media often gave a voice to those who wished to speak up against political injustice, criticize government institutions and policies. Even though the public had a voice through news media, one can argue that the content had always been curated in certain ways to appeal to the mass. The rise of the internet and social media has certainly changed these dynamics. The information that is being shared through the internet often relies on less formal formats and often lacks justification or proofs. “the rise of less informative media may crowd out existing—and more informative—types of news media and may end up generating negative effects in terms of political participation” (George and Waldfogel 2008). “ Importantly, in weakly institutionalized environments, the role of media as an instrument of political accountability might be jeopardized as they are subject to capture by incumbent politicians (Besley and Prat). Sobbrio’s study of the political economy of social media shows that government authority over news media allows the state to use it as an autocratic propaganda machine. Not only that, if the media environment is weak as an institution, it also creates an opportunity for foreign and/or independent media to criticize the government.

In these circumstances, the internet and dramatic expansion of social media emerged as a new variable that made an already complex socio-political situation even more complicated.

“The Internet seems both good news and bad news for the political voice of the average citizen”

(Hindman, 142). Hence, the socio-political consequences of ‘new media’ (social media, content sharing platforms, websites, and blogs) became a new field of debate and research.

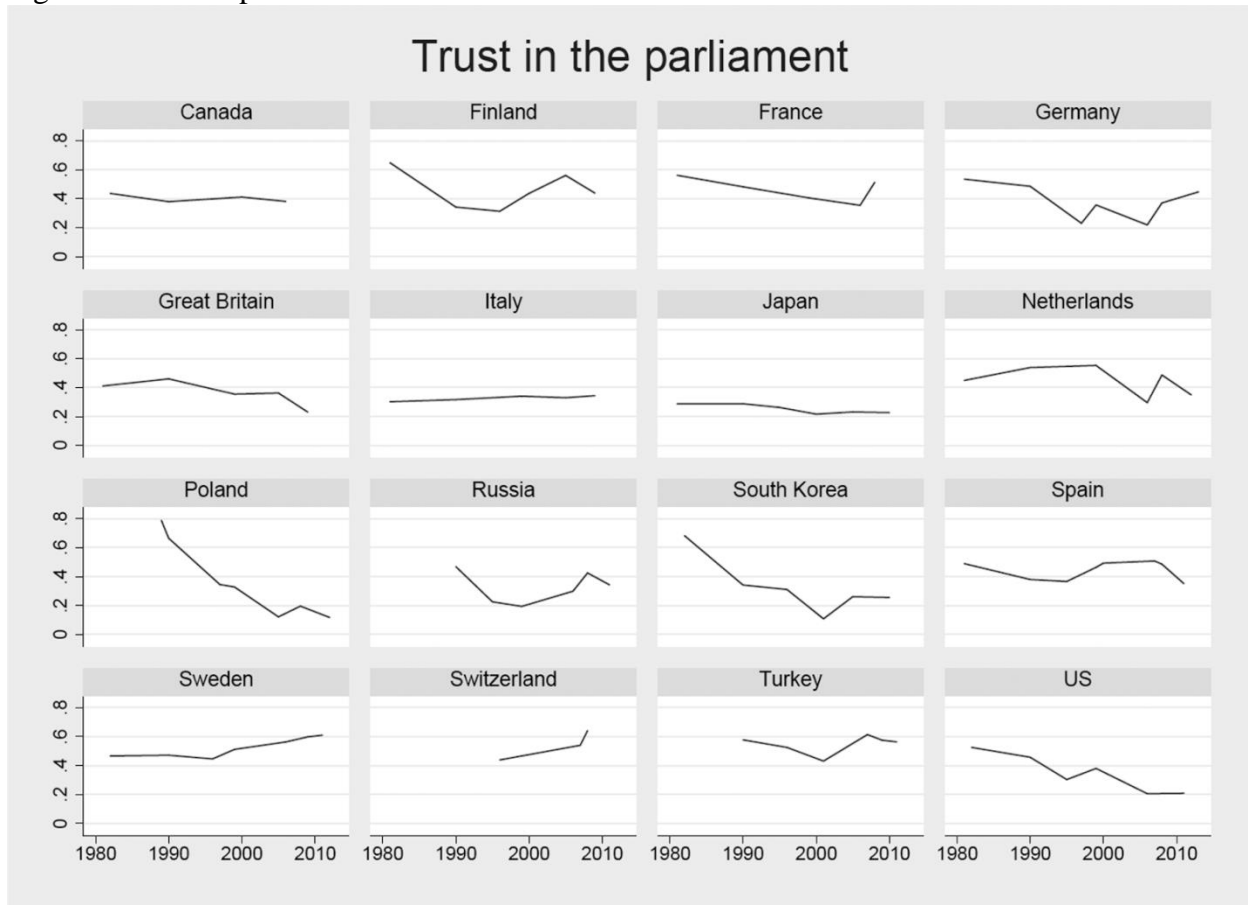
“ The first crucial difference between new and traditional media lies in the intentional bias prevalent in one compared to the other. Traditional media have a weaker incentive to bias their contents by reporting “alternative facts” than new media. Two factors jointly contribute to this difference: the reputational incentives and the cost structure present in the two types of media. Reporting false information typically results in very high reputation costs for traditional media” (Sobbrio 52).

As a result, traditional news media often tends to omit information or draws the attention of the reader away by focusing on some other topic than outright using false information. The personal political bias of individual journalists can also influence the content of the publication. On the other hand, new media do not have any such boundary or limiting factor. New media can exploit the digital platforms to stay anonymous and hidden while reporting falsified information. Their reputation is often not put under any investigation or criticism. New media can also remain beyond the legal bindings of any given nation or state. Even if one website or one service gets banned by one particular government, representatives of the same group can continue their dissemination of falsified information by opening another website the next day.

The first study to observe the effects of false news in a larger socio-political context was done by Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow in 2017. Allcott and Gentzkow analyzed the fake news shared on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. According to these authors, 41 anti-trump and 115 anti-clinton fake news were shared on various social media 7.6 and 30.3 million times respectively. “ an average individual saw, remembered, and believed only

around 1.14 fake news articles. This implies that the effect of fake news on actual voting choices might be limited” (Sobbrio 53).

Figure 1: Trust in parliament.

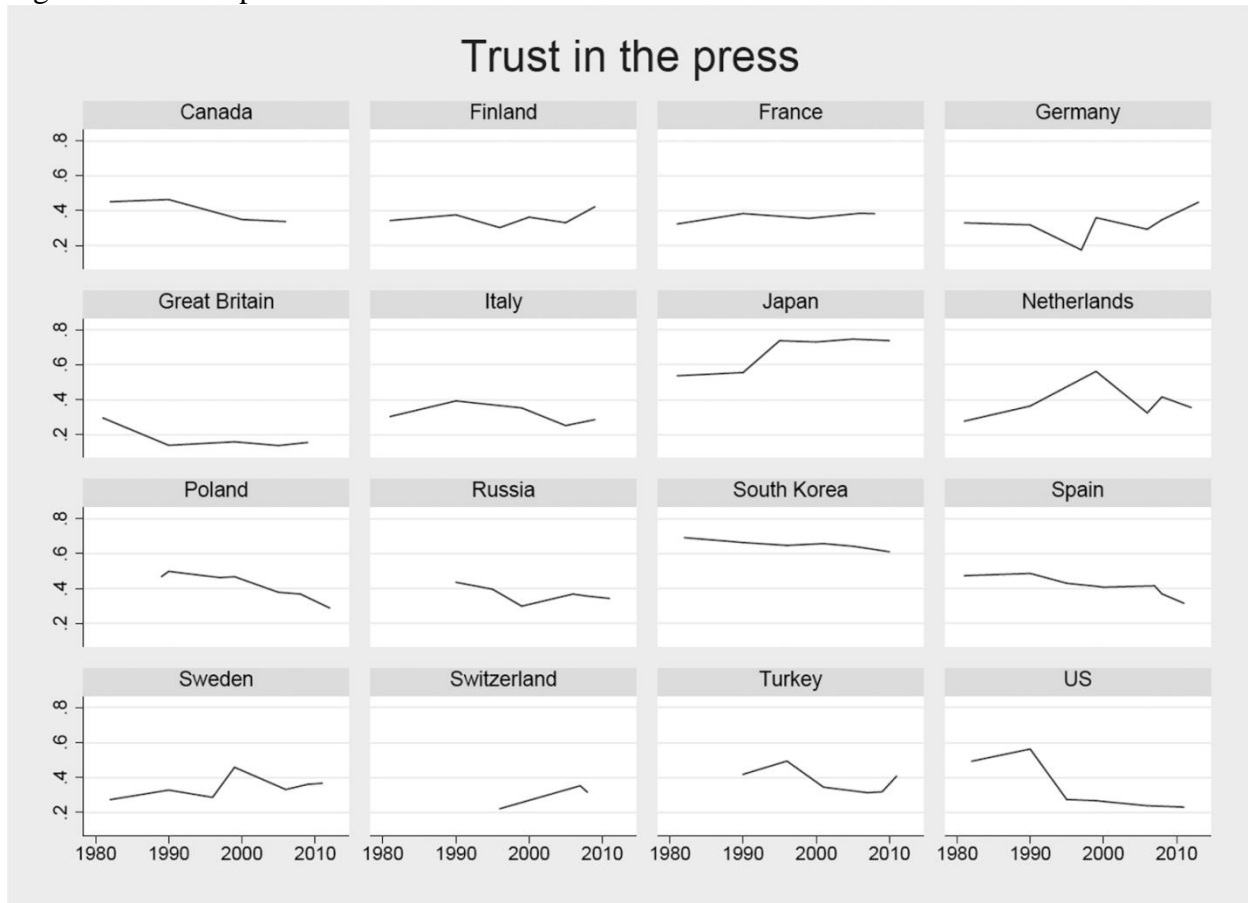


Caption: The figure shows the percentage of individuals who respond “a great deal” or “quite a lot” to the question: “How much confidence do you have in the press?” (Sobbrio 54; European Value Survey and World Value Survey 1981–2014.)

Allcott and Gentzkow observation brings up one obvious question, ‘how do social media platforms impact the citizen’s trust in the government and the press?’. Though one can argue that the internet has been blamed by many as the catalyst behind the growing distrust of experts and the government as a whole, the data is inconclusive. Figures 1 and 2 here, “show for a selected

sample of countries, the evolution over time in the percentage of people who have a high level of confidence in two key democratic institutions: the parliament and the press” (Sobbrio 54).

Figure 2: Trust in press.



Caption: The figure shows the percentage of individuals who respond “a great deal” or “quite a lot” to the question: “How much confidence do you have in the parliament?” (Sobbrio 55; European Value Survey and World Value Survey 1981–2014.)

While these graphs provide largely inconclusive data, it is worth noting that in the context of countries known to have weak democratic institutions and where the government retains the power to influence and control news flow and its content; these graphs take a downward slope. Even in the United States individuals seem to have been losing trust in the press and the government even before the emergence of internet technology. However, “such

trends seem to precede the arrival of the Internet and of the Web 2.0 revolution, which is associated with the rise of social media platforms” (Sobbrio 55). But more recent data perhaps shows the continuation of this process and indicates a certain association between the rise of social media and people losing trust in the state and the press institutions. According to Pew Research Center’s 2016 report, younger generations among the American Citizens are more likely to get their news through online platforms and are less likely to trust traditional media outlets.

2.2 Algorithm/Digital Bias:

While debating the effects of new media on politics and society by extension, one crucial aspect of the process is often overlooked, i.e the automated algorithms of these platforms. In the cases of search engines and social media platforms, users directly interact with the automated algorithms. Each of these algorithms are set up by the parent company/service provider, and these algorithms essentially rank the information available online or in their particular database. Essentially these digital platforms have the power to decide, which information users are being exposed to, which information gets priority, and what pops up on the top of the search results. Though search results on different platforms vary based on the business model of the company and way the algorithms are set up, meaning an user will be exposed to different sets of information based on their search on different platforms, the information is still curated by a third party.

“While humans are certainly responsible for editorial decisions, these [search engines] decisions are mainly expressed in the form of software which thoroughly transforms the ways in which procedures are imagined, discussed, implemented, and managed. In a sense, we are closer to statistics than to journalism when it comes to bias in Web search” (Rieder and Sire 2).

Moreover, search engines like Google and social media like Facebook more than often organize their search results based on advertiser's requirements. Often certain news links or advertisements will get priority over other more relevant search results due to the influence of advertisement incomes. Nonetheless, user activity on the internet creates huge amounts of data every day which is ultimately used to program the automated algorithms. “

“In 2010, Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google, stated that every two days “we now create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003.” In this world of “data deluge,” the ranking algorithms used by search engines and social media represent a necessary tool to “pluck the diamond from the waste” (Sobbrio 55).

Thus, digital bias created by these services are inherently different from organizational or personal bias that can be found in traditional media formats. In these scenarios, the automated algorithms of these services act almost like a digital gatekeeper of information. And the impacts of these automated algorithms in association with the user or the reader's personal beliefs demands further detailed study.

These automated algorithms become particularly problematic when we take into account the fact that these algorithms can also be used and manipulated to disseminate false information and political/cultural propaganda. These algorithms often rank information based on their popularity and response from the user/readers. Since, this technology works under the guise of public preference, websites can choose to omit or remove certain news or pieces of information without the fear of public backlash. Moreover, search results are often organized based on users previous search history and area of interest. This dynamic situation creates an opportunity of manipulation of the population through campaigns of misinformation. The recent capitol riot incident in the USA serves as the most recent example of such campaigns. The research done in

2016 by Pew Research Center shows that 38% U.S adults get their news from different online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and other apps. “In the 18–29 age segment, this percentage goes up to 50%, becoming the most frequently used news platform” (Sobbrio 57).

2.3 Bangladesh in the age of social media:

Amidst the complexity of technology vs society, where does Bangladesh sit as a country and how the local politics and society is changing being affected--is a difficult question to answer. The most recent work on such topics was done by Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, et al in 2020. Al-Zaman, et al. particularly looked at how much rumors and false information is disseminated through both mainstream media and online media and their respective impact on the population. Al-Zaman, et al. identified “online media and mainstream media are the two main sources of social media rumors, along with three tentative aims: positive, negative, and unknown” (77). Their observation of rumors spread through both mainstream and online media spans over a duration of 3.4 years. As they observed, within this time “Political rumors dominate social media, but its percentage is decreasing, while religion-related rumors are increasing; most of the social media rumors are negative and emerge from online media, and social media itself is the dominant online source of social media rumors” (Al-Zaman, et al. 78). One of their deductions is directly based upon rumors about covid-19 pandemic. And they deduced, much like how the U.S.A used social media campaigns to combat the threat of Zika Virus, similar actions could be taken in Bangladesh. “However, rumor propagation in social media amid such pandemics may hinder the campaigns’ positive outcomes and provoke mass anxiety” (Al-Zaman, et al. 79).

Table 1: Source of rumor.

| | | Source type | | |
|-------|------|----------------------|--------------|-------|
| | | Mainstream media | Online media | |
| Years | 2017 | Count | 8 | 15 |
| | | % within years | 34.8% | 65.2% |
| | | % within source type | 24.2% | 10.1% |
| | 2018 | Count | 14 | 59 |
| | | % within years | 19.2% | 80.8% |
| | | % within source type | 42.4% | 39.9% |
| | 2019 | Count | 7 | 18 |
| | | % within years | 28.0% | 72.0% |
| | | % within source type | 21.2% | 12.2% |
| | 2020 | Count | 4 | 56 |
| | | % within years | 6.7% | 93.3% |
| | | % within source type | 12.1% | 37.8% |

Caption: The table above shows how much rumors were spread through mainstream media and online media from 2017-2014. (Al-Zaman, et al. 84).

From 2017 to 2020, 181 different confirmed rumors were taken into account for the study. And the study shows, “In 2017, online media was responsible for 65.2% of social media rumors, whereas mainstream media was responsible for 34.8% of rumors . The gap widens in 2020 with 93.3% online media-based rumors and only 6.7% mainstream media based rumors”

(Al-Zaman, et al. 85). This indicates a clear change in the process of information dissemination and the preferred medium for such purposes. As the number shows, internet based platforms are increasingly being used for such purposes, and by 2020-- social media and by extension the internet has become the main source of such information.

Table 2: Percentage of different topics if rumor.

| | | | Category | | | | | | |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|-------|-----------|------------------|-----------|
| | | | Crime & Human Rights | Entertainment | Health & Education | Other | Political | Religiopolitical | Religious |
| Source type | Mainstream media | Count | 1 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 4 |
| | | % within source type | 3.0% | 18.2% | 15.2% | 12.1% | 27.3% | 12.1% | 12.1% |
| | | % within category | 5.0% | 46.2% | 17.2% | 21.1% | 14.5% | 22.2% | 20.0% |
| | Online media | Count | 19 | 7 | 24 | 15 | 53 | 14 | 16 |
| | | % within source type | 12.8% | 4.7% | 16.2% | 10.1% | 35.8% | 9.5% | 10.8% |
| | | % within category | 95.0% | 53.8% | 82.8% | 78.9% | 85.5% | 77.8% | 80.0% |

Caption: This table shows the percentage of different topics of rumor from 2017-2020 (Al-Zaman, et al 84).

“the percentages of online rumors ebbed and flowed in every consecutive year, which are 10.1%, 39.9%, 12.2%, and 37.8% in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively. Although the numbers fluctuate, the last two years show an upward tendency. Conversely, the percentages of mainstream media rumors decrease with a slight fluctuation: 24.2%, 42.4%, 21.2%, and 12.1% in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively” (Al-Zaman, et al 84).

As shown in figures 3 and 4, online media has gradually taken over as the main source of false information. And mainstream media as a source of misinformation, the numbers show a clear downward tendency. While the preferred medium of spreading rumors gradually changed, in both types of media platforms political issues retained the top spot as subject of these rumors.

In both cases one-quarter to one-third of all rumors and false information was about different political issues. Though political rumors retained top position and the percentage of religious rumors saw a gradual increase; rumors regarding entertainment industry, crime and human rights stayed below five percent. “The sources of entertainment rumors seem balanced with 46.2% of mainstream media and 53.8% of online media, whereas mainstream (5.0%) and online (95.0%) media have a huge gap in terms of crime & human rights rumors” (Al-Zaman, et al 84). More interestingly, most of the online rumors originated in 3 popular social media/content sharing platforms. While more than 80% of all online rumors originated in Facebook, Youtube and Twitter took second and third place.

Table 3: Purpose behind each category of rumour.

| | | | Category | | | | | | |
|-----|----------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|-------|-----------|------------------|-----------|
| | | | Crime & Human Rights | Entertainment | Health & Education | Other | Political | Religiopolitical | Religious |
| Aim | Negative | Count | 14 | 7 | 25 | 11 | 47 | 13 | 15 |
| | | % within aim | 10.6% | 5.3% | 18.9% | 8.3% | 35.6% | 9.8% | 11.4% |
| | | % within category | 70.0% | 53.8% | 86.2% | 57.9% | 75.8% | 72.2% | 75.0% |
| | Positive | Count | 5 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 12 | 4 | 5 |
| | | % within aim | 12.2% | 12.2% | 9.8% | 14.6% | 29.3% | 9.8% | 12.2% |
| | | % within category | 25.0% | 38.5% | 13.8% | 31.6% | 19.4% | 22.2% | 25.0% |
| | Unknown | Count | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| | | % within aim | 12.5% | 12.5% | 0.0% | 25.0% | 37.5% | 12.5% | 0.0% |
| | | % within category | 5.0% | 7.7% | 0.0% | 10.5% | 4.8% | 5.6% | 0.0% |

Table 3: Table shows intentions and purpose behind each category of rumors. (Al-Zaman, et al 84).

Amidst the 181 cases rumor and false information campaign that was observed through 2017-2020, 72.9% carried a negative connotation. As figure 5 shows, the majority of these rumors were centered around political issues and religious issues. And in many cases these two

categories overlapped which was subsequently categorized as ‘religio political’ issues. 75.8% of all political rumors, 75% of all religious rumors and 72.2% of all ‘religio political’ rumors were negative. However, “ of negative rumors, political rumors are on the top of the list. Although a large share of political rumors (35.6%) are negative, the aims of the most political rumors (37.5%) cannot be identified” (Al-Zaman, et al. 85). In contrast, there were less rumors regarding the entertainment industry. Nonetheless, the majority of these rumors (53.8%) had negative purposes. Either way, 86.4 percent of all negative rumors originated and spread through online platforms, namely Facebook. While only 13.6% originated and circulated through mainstream media outlets. “This huge gap suggests online media produces a higher number of perilous rumors in contrast to mainstream sources. Online media produces more negative rumors (77.0%) than positive rumors (18.9%)” (Al-Zaman et al. 85). All these numbers create one clear picture, in the case of Bangladesh, the internet (more accurately Facebook) has become the main source of misinformation and propaganda campaigns and the intensity of this process is increasing every year.

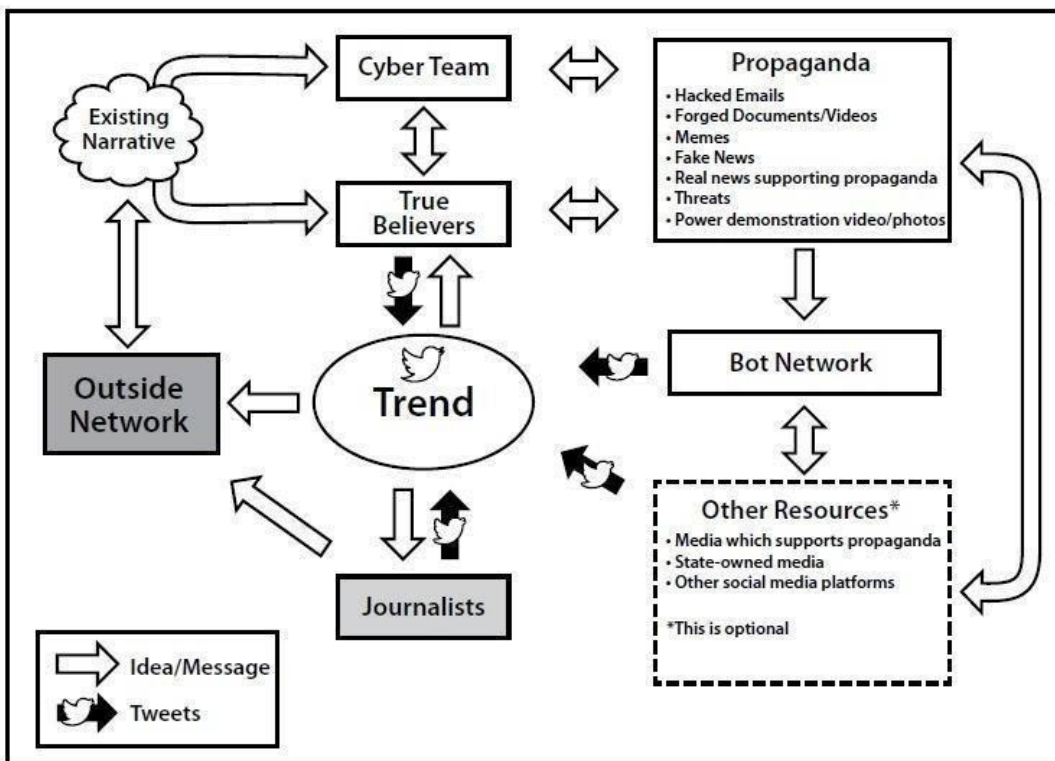
2.4 **Intervention of foreign powers:**

Such trends in the process of information dissemination opens the door to the debate of information warfare. On a state level, which can occur both internally and externally. Lt. Col Jarred Prier from United States Air force shades light on how information flow on social media can be controlled and manipulated by state adversaries to weaken the state infrastructures by influencing public opinion. “Cyber operations today target people within a society, influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, and diminishing trust in the government” (Prier 50). As a defense and security expert, Lt. Col. Prier’s analysis shows, state adversaries could easily seize

control and exploit the ‘trending’ mechanism of social media to harm state interest, discredit the public and create internal strife which can lead to eventual weakening of the state power.

“Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook employ an algorithm to analyze words, phrases, or hashtags to create a list of topics sorted in order of popularity. This “trend list” is a quick way to review the most discussed topics at a given time” (Prier 52). This creates an ‘cherry picking opportunity’ for anyone who wishes to exploit these trends for their own personal or political benefits. “Using existing online networks in conjunction with automatic “bot” accounts, foreign agents can insert propaganda into a social media platform, create a trend, and rapidly disseminate a message faster and cheaper than through any other medium”(Prier 52).

Figure 3: Exploitation by Internal and external forces.



Caption: The figure shows how existing features of social media can be exploited for political reasons both by internal and external forces (Prier 58).

As his first case study, Lt. Col. Prier analyzed the 2016 presidential election of the United States of America and based on intelligence reports, identified state funded media (Russia), paid users and third party intermediaries as the means of anti-state propaganda campaigns.

“Moscow’s influence campaign followed a messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users, or ‘trolls’ (Prier 70). By succeeding in this social media propaganda campaign, Russia effectively managed to alter the election results without taking any direct military action against its main adversary from the western world.

Moreover, the same strategies can be employed by extremist and terrorist groups to destabilize a nation or manipulate its citizens to take actions that will eventually lead to nefarious results. Taking the Islamic State as a case study, Lt. Col. Prier’s observation finds,

“Through a combination of ingenious marketing and cyber mastery, IS bolstered its message around the world. First, the group refined IS branding. The organization projects a very specific image to the world that affects the viewer differently based on beliefs. To a follower, the images that are shared via social media demonstrate strength and power” (Prier 63).

Instead of Facebook, IS primarily relied on Twitter for its propaganda campaign. As it made tweets as an organization, the same post was retweeted through its followers and bot accounts, which bolstered the organization’s image online as an organization with worldwide support. Though the number of true supporters of this terrorist organization remained smaller than its online presence, Their strategy to present themselves as a legitimate organization largely succeeded due to its fake image created online and its influence spread throughout the Middle East. “Worldwide trends on Twitter have been a boon for IS. Creating and hijacking trends

garnered attention for the group that would otherwise have gone unnoticed on social media” (Prier 64).

This exploitation of social media for political benefit or ideological radicalization is not exclusive to the United States of America or Russia. Islami Militants in Bangladesh have been using social media platforms to recruit extremist followers, to spread political propaganda. And the target of these online propaganda usually turns out to be youth. “the major part of recruitment is done through the internet and the people who have the most access to the internet are urban youths” (Mostofa and Doyle 114). “A survey conducted by the police on 250 extremists thus shows that 82 percent of them were originally inspired by social media propaganda and 80 percent of them used Thrima, Wechat, Messenger, as well as other communication apps” (Hasan 2017).

On one hand, we see a subtle but definitely noticeable change in public perception of media and authority. On the other hand, internet-based communication platforms, social media in particular have created a digital bias. Though algorithms are based on AI, their parameters are set by human beings. These algorithms can certainly be used in the form of advertising tools by any one with enough money, thus creating an opportunity for exploitation of these tools for political benefit. This possibility is shown in action by Lt. Col. Prier. In the meantime, the gradual increase of false news amidst Bangladeshi corner of these social media platforms indicate that the country might be prone to the same dangers identified by the Colonel.

Chapter 3:

3.1 Legal bindings (ICT Act 2006 and DSA 2018):

In a recent turn of events, Bangladesh came in at 152 out of 180 countries in the world press freedom index created by French organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF). As photojournalist Shofiqul Islam Kajol said, “We do have journalism in Bangladesh at the moment, but its controlled. This controlled journalism is caused by oppressive laws like Digital Security Act 2018” (The Daily Star). The same article from The Daily Star reported that since the first covid-19 patient was identified in early 2020, more than 80 journalists have been sued under Digital Security Act 2018, more than 10 journalists were sued under Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (Amended in 2013), and 50 other Journalists were arrested for miscellaneous cases by police and other security forces. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) chimed in, “the constitutional right to information and expression is under threat in the name of digital security” (Digital Security).

The Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 was controversial from the beginning. The law was later amended by replacing the Section 57 of the act, which essentially gave birth to the Digital Security Act 2018. And from the beginning journalists, academics, scholars and industry leaders have largely identified the law as an attack on freedom of expression and free press. “This new law has however shown a more restrictive approach towards freedom of expression in its wordings and application than the former one” (Sabera). Though citizens from different walks of life have repeatedly called for abolishment of the Digital Security Act 2018, “the risk of unsupervised/unprotected use of cyberspace has often been presented as a justification for the legislation” by the government and lawmakers (Sabera).

Freedom of expression is recognized by the People's Republic of Bangladesh as a fundamental human right. Though this fundamental right is supposed to be protected by article 39 of the constitution, it can be argued that, "it presents a long list of restrictive grounds with the said guarantee" (Saber).

"This plethora of limits on free expression has often been criticised for creating an array of disproportionate exceptions to the general rule, and not conforming to international standards... Although the Act aims to ensure digital security, it ends up providing only a tautological definition by mentioning it as 'the security of any digital device or digital system.' This vague and overly broad definition results in arbitrariness when Section 8 empowers the Director General of the Digital Security Agency as well as the members of the law enforcement agency to remove or block information published in digital media if it threatens 'digital security'" (Saber).

Alongside its 'vagueness and over definition', The Act also suffers from a 'vice of over criminalization'. Moreover, Section 25 of the Digital Security Act criminalizes, "spreading information with an intention to affect the image or reputation of the country or to spread confusion.' This does not have any reasonable link with the ground of state security or other constitutionally permitted restrictive grounds" (Saber). This combination of vague yet overly elaborate definitions and over-criminalization is essentially choking the 'free' part of the 'free press' and 'freedom of speech'.

The Vagueness of Digital Security Act 2018 and its oppressive implications were critically identified and voiced against by the Editors' Council (সম্পাদক পরিষদ) of Bangladesh. Editors' Council is a national organization of newspaper editors in Bangladesh that

campaigns for freedom of speech and freedom of the press (Wikipedia contributors). According to the Editors' Council, "The law goes against the very nature and practice of independent journalism that stands to protect people's right to know and exposes abuse of power and corruption" (Why the Editors). Though lawmakers of the country claim that the Digital Security Act 2018 is to be used as a tool to prevent cyber crimes and provide public security in the digital sphere, the Editors' Council see's the Act as a tool of "policing media operations, censoring content and controlling media freedom and freedom of speech and expression as guaranteed by our constitution" (Why the Editors).

Though this kind of policing measures can be traced back to the Information and Communication Technology Act of 2006 and more specifically section 57 of that particular law. "Journalists and people who exercised their constitutional rights to freedom of speech suffered imprisonment and harassment under Section 57 of the ICT Act. The same is now being said that Journalists have nothing to worry about the DSA, but the apprehension is that journalists will again face the same kind of harassment by this law" (Why the Editors).

The Digital Security Act 2018 allows the police and security forces to make arrests without warrants, to enter premises, and to search and seize digital devices, computer networks and servers. The police can act upon suspicion and do not need permission or approval from any higher authority. Hence, creating an atmosphere of fear and panic among journalists and regular citizens. "The DSA is focused only on the "regulation" aspect and totally neglects the need for media freedom. This is one of the fundamental flaws of DSA making it so dangerous for the media" (Why the Editors). Perhaps, the most dangerous part of the Digital Security Act 2018 is "the enormous arbitrary power given to the police who may arrest a journalist just on suspicion

of a so-called crime that he thinks may be committed in the future...In practical terms this will bring journalism under police control” (Why the Editors).

The oppressive nature of DSA 2018 can be observed if you do detailed analysis of the different sections of the Act. Section 8 of DSA 2018 gives the Director General essentially the power to determine which information should be on the internet and which should not. The Director General can deem publications on digital platforms as a threat to digital security and can request Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to remove such information and data, or even block any platform altogether. Thus giving the Director general power to essentially control the process of information dissemination. The Editors' Council also identified the same issues with section 8 of DSA 2018.

“There are two issues of concern here -- the power of the Director General and the power of the law enforcement agencies. The power to block contents will hit the heart of publication either in print or online. Any report may be blocked or a photograph may be confiscated that may lead to disruption of any media outlet...The justification needed to remove or block content are too vague and subject to individual interpretation and hence leave the scope for abuse of the law” (Why the Editors).

Section 21 of the DSA 2018 identifies any kind of propaganda against the Liberation War, Spirit of the Liberation War, Father of the Nation and National Flag as a punishable crime. In this case, the complication comes from the terminology. More specifically, ‘Spirit of the Liberation War’ or ‘Muktijuddher Chetona’ is a rather vague term. Since the definition of this term is never clarified, it’s left open for interpretation creating an opportunity for the law enforcement agencies to file cases against journalists and citizens alike. “Without further

defining the ‘crimes’ under this section and clearly specifying what constitutes a ‘crime’ we run the risk of serious abuse of this law and harassment of journalists and the punishment is up to life-term or (and) Tk 3 crore in fine or both” (Why the Editors).

Section 25 of The Digital Security Act 2018 also states that if any person knowingly publishes ‘false or intimidating’ information online and damages the image and reputation of the state, his actions will be considered as a crime. Moreover, what constitutes damaging the image or reputation of the state is never identified in the Act itself. The Editors’ Council deemed this clause as a direct obstacle in the process of investigative reporting.

“Corrupt people will use this law to intimidate journalists and media organizations and try to prevent publication of such stories on the pretext that the reports have attacked or intimidated them...Any investigative report that reveals corruption about a person or an institution is bound to ‘irritate’, ‘embarrass’ or ‘humiliate’ someone” (Why the Editors).

The section 43 of the Act grants police the power to arrest anyone based on suspicion, without needing approval from any higher authority. If police deems that a crime under this law is about to be committed by any party, and evidence might be destroyed or lost-- The police can enter any premise, search the place and person of interest, make arrests and seize any electronic device deemed associated with the criminal act. “This is by far the most dangerous of the provisions of the law. the threat of arrest without warrant will naturally prevent a journalist from doing their work. When police get the power to arrest without warrant, and on mere SUSPICION then media freedom will be buried under this law” (The Daily Star). Moreover, 14 of the 20 provisions of punishment are left non-bailable by the lawmakers. Meaning, journalists will be facing constant threat of being apprehended by law enforcement officials just for doing their job.

“This will prevent all forms of real journalism and make our media nothing more than public relations and propaganda outlets” (The Daily Star).

3.2 Safety concern:

In such a legal context, journalistic work becomes much more difficult. Moreover, safety and security of individuals often overtakes the objectivity aspect of journalism. “Safety of journalists has context-specific meanings and implications. A journalist who is working at the New York Times in the democratic USA will have different standards for safety (and its preservation) from a journalist working in Rwanda or Pakistan where democratic institutes, norms, and cultures are under pressure” (Hasan and Wadud 27). Hasan and Wadud’s research of quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys and personal communication can be considered as predecessor and parallel to this research work. They identified three intertwined dimensions that address the safety issue of journalists.

“First, journalists’ safety incorporates avoiding bodily harm (imprisonment, enforced disappearance, and so forth), and harassment, as well as economic and career threats. Second, in order to remain safe, journalists undertake various tactics including compromising the objectivity of news in a regime where security apparatus and pro-government journalists work in tandem to surveil and intimidate non-partisan journalists. Third, the tactics used by journalists decrease public faith in the media and the media can no longer play a watchdog role” (Hasan and Wadud 27).

Part of the safety concern originates from the implications of the Digital Security Act. As getting arrested, imprisonment or forced disappearance seems to be the main cause of concern

for the journalist as identified by the survey works. The short interviews conducted for this research also reflect the findings of Hasan and Wadud. 10 journalists participated in the interview, and more than half of interviews admitted that they have been either threatened or received flak in one form or another, by either state backed institutions or the public at one time or another.

Another interesting aspect of this study points towards a growing distrust of media organizations. Upon taking short interviews of 20 people from all swaths of life, it was clear that more than 80% of the participants had a growing distrust of media corporations and they often took to social media to make their voices heard.

Table 4: Public perception about credibility of local media in Bangladesh.

| | Question: Bangladeshi owned media outlets are credible and provide you with objective news | Results in percentage (%) | Number of respondents | Total respondents |
|---|--|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Strongly Agree | 0 | 0 | |
| 2 | Agree | 0.7 | 1 | |
| 3 | Partially Agree | 28.3 | 39 | |
| 4 | Partially Disagree | 5.1 | 7 | 139 |
| 5 | Disagree | 30.4 | 42 | |
| 6 | Strongly Disagree | 35.5 | 50 | |

Table 4: Public perception about credibility of the local media in Bangladesh. (Hasan and Wadud 32).

As shown in the table above, more than half of the participants thought bangladeshi news media outlets do not maintain objectivity, thus not credible enough. In contrast, Bangladeshi consumers thought of foreign sources of news as much more credible, as shown in the following table:

Table 5: Public perception about international media in Bangladesh.

| Question: Western News outlets in Bangladesh (such as BBC, AFP, DW, AP) are credible and provide you with objective news about Bangladesh | | Results in Percentage (%) | Number of respondents | Total respondents |
|---|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Strongly Agree | 5 | 7 | 139 |
| 2 | Agree | 23.7 | 33 | |
| 3 | Partially Agree | 51.1 | 71 | |
| 4 | Partially Disagree | 8.6 | 12 | |
| 5 | Disagree | 8.6 | 12 | |
| 6 | Strongly Disagree | 2.9 | 4 | |

Caption: Public perception about credibility of international media in Bangladesh (Hasan and Wadud 32).

Based on above mentioned data and personal interviews, it can be concluded that journalists and media organizations are often at the receiving end of flak, both from the government and the public.

Findings:

Based on the analysis of social media's effects on media organizations, public response and state policies in the larger socio-political context-- both internationally and locally, we can draw following conclusions:

- The emergence of bilateral communication between media organizations and general readers due to advancement in technology has put the media world in a state of flux. On one hand, media organizations with old business models are suffering financially. On the other hand, the same situation has given the opportunity to reach new audiences on a global scale.
- In this age of technology and social media, information does not flow in a linear path. Instead of traveling from government to media to citizens; the information exchange occurs between all of the stakeholders at the same time.
- Beside media organizations and general readers, any state and other business entities can use tools available online to control and manipulate the flow of information. These tools also allow dissemination of false news that can impact a country's socio-political environment.
- This multidimensional information flow is also altering political activism.
- A growing distrust in the press and the authority can be observed both globally and in Bangladesh.
- Social media and other internet services have become the primary source of misinformation in Bangladesh.
- Outside forces can use social media tools to impact politics of a country, which may result in major political changes.

- In Bangladesh, Legal limitations and public response is creating an environment of stress and constant policing by the state.
- Though citizens of Bangladesh often use social media and the internet as their primary source of news, trust in local media organizations is in a slow decline.

Conclusion:

The technological advance of the 21st century is gradually changing the media landscape, not only in Bangladesh, but also globally. If we try to observe this phase of transition through the landscape of the propaganda model proposed by Noam Chomski and Edward S. Herman, we can safely conclude that media organizations are not only receiving huge flak from the readers and their respective states, they are also losing credibility due to availability of information/dissemination of misinformation from multiple sources. On the other hand, Joseph T. Klappers' reinforcement theory seems to fall short to explain the impact of social media and internet communication on the larger media communication process; since the communication process is not flowing in one direction anymore. Though there is some indication found in surveys and personal interviews that rather than reinforcing citizens' previously held beliefs, social media and internet by extension is providing a news sphere for exploration and formulation of opinion; it hardly provides any conclusive evidence of reinforcing previously held socio political beliefs though the use of digital media. Moreover, George Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis also falls short when social media and the internet is thrown into the mix. Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis focused on effects of television programs on its viewer base. Fundamentally, Televisions are one way communication tools, and the content can be highly curated. In contrast, internet based communication systems establish a multidimensional communication process, where statements can be countered with opposing information immediately. Thus proving Gerbner's hypothesis inapplicable in the case of 21st century communication methods. Regardless, recent research work on various aspects of internet and social media's implications on the society and political environment shows that internet technology and different forms of social media has slowly integrated itself in socio-political

mechanics of modern society. And further, more detailed research work is necessary to fully understand its implications and effects.

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