



AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA VOICES ON THE ETHNIC ISSUES IN SRI LANKA. SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SINHALA AND MUSLIM ETHNIC GROUPS

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Abstract

Social media usage is increasing day by day in Sri Lanka. It became the largest news-sharing media among the young generation. This research paper investigates social media behavior and its impact on ethnic issues in Sri Lanka. The majority of Sri Lankans are Buddhists and there are two major minorities such as Tamil and Muslim. The main aim was to identify social media behavior and how it impacts ethnic issues in Sri Lanka. The main research question was whether social media reporting impacts religious conflicts. This is a mix of methodological research. The data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. The sample is 150 from 4 main provinces such as western, southern, eastern, and central Sri Lanka. This research mainly indicated that social media gives good freedom for the majority and minorities to make their voices on the same platform. Moreover, it indicates that social media create hood subgroups and it creates distractions in society. On the other hand, the results indicate that social media can create a more negative impact subjectively. Furthermore, indicates that it can increase conflict situations as it could create different news without accuracy. It was very interesting to find out that the social groups trust the news and the online chatter on social media more than the traditional media in Sri Lanka in the case of ethnic issues.

keywords: *social media, online chatter, online posts, social media voices*

Introduction

The human being is a social creature. People need to get information from the day they enter the world. In history, the man spoke with each other utilizing basic techniques like learning, thoughts, encounters, and so forth. After that, with the advancement of the general public, man created open techniques to speak with each other. News ideas were produced because of the basic needs and needs of man. This occurred after the modern insurgency of the general public and now a day's man gives a high incentive for the news. Because of that humans draw in for media to extinguish their thirst for news. People need to know the satisfied data, instruction, social capacities, and ideological capacities. People have a thirst for information nowadays. During this era, the media is the main source of sharing news. There are four main sectors of Mass Media. This is divided into traditional, electronic, print, and new media. Traditional media comes in different forms and is known by different names in different regions of the country. People use different kinds of communication systems in the ancient period. As technology wasn't well developed this traditional media was born as people need to communicate with each other in different situations.



The traditional media methods are different with the territory and region. Electronic media can divide into two main sectors as Radio and television. During the first and second world war periods, this television and radio communication system was spread throughout the world. Print media is the first media system after the traditional media which people use to spread the news among the community. But during this era, all the media is becoming kind of traditional and the new media is becoming a trend in the whole world. This new media has different sectors such as social media, mobile apps, different websites, and blogs. Social media is the fastest-growing communication today. As this has a variety of communication methods for society. Communications have evolved notably since the invention of the telegraph. Today, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) via tools such as computers, the Internet, and mobile phones, brings a larger diversity of agents to the conversation in many directions such as appreciating diversities, solving problems, sharing experiences, and voicing out opinions without fear. Previously, the world media have struggled to develop effective communication channels to serve the people. In the ICTs era, the custom of media has rapidly changed: new opportunities have arisen for greater freedom of expression, even though new threats are also emerging at the same time (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

The social network Facebook, which was one of the first social media tools of its kind, was launched in 2004 and today has over 600 million users worldwide. The Facebook “event” in support of the Egyptian revolution was joined by more than 80,000 people online. The socio-political activism in Tunisia, namely the Tunisian revolution, also known as the “Jasmine” or “WikiLeaks revolution” and the Egyptian revolution of 2010-2011, was largely organized, supported, and driven through the use of social media-based tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Besides, the students’ protest in Tehran in 2009-2010, known as the “Green or Facebook revolution” and the “Red Shirt” protests in Thailand in 2010 revealed a crucial impact of ICTs in a new age of social protest (Howard, 2011).

Even if there is no study that assets, measures and proves impact of the media on ethnic conflict, in most cases the effect of the media on ethnic conflict is agreed and “There is an emerging belief that the media may well be the most effective means of conflict resolution and preventing new wars” (Howard, 2003:2).

This research was conducted due to the lack of literature in recent years in Sri Lanka about social media’s impact on the ethnic and religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. With the fast usage of social media, the news and the information systems which is shared in Sri Lanka have been changed. This research was conducted to fulfil that gap. The dependent variable in this research is religious conflicts and the main three independent variables were used to measure the impact. The variables are online chatter, hate messages, and incitements. The research indicates the impact of demographic factors on religious conflicts. The main research questions are:



- What are the main factors influencing religious conflicts through social media in Sri Lanka?
- How the interaction between demographic factors and the religious conflicts

There are three main research objectives in this research

- To discover the most influential factor in religious conflict situations through social media in Sri Lanka.
- To investigate the interaction factors of demographics to the Sri Lankan religious conflicts.

There are five main hypotheses as below addressed from this research.

H₁: There is a significant impact from the online chatter towards the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka

H₂: There is a significant impact from the hate messages towards the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka

H₃: There is a significant impact from the incitements towards the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka

H₄: The level of education has an impact on the understanding of social media information

H₅: Gender has an impact on the understanding of the social media information

Literature Review

“There is an emerging belief that the media may well be the most effective means of conflict resolution and preventing new wars” (Howard, 2003) Therefore “Nearly all modern post-conflict peace-building efforts have included media programs” (Arcan, 2013).

It also requires fewer skills and can be consequently managed with less training. On the other hand, traditional media’s information and its sources may actually be considered as more static and invisible compared to social media, which provides many fast services. The underlying argument is that the increase of these technologies is causing rapid transformations in all areas of life; and that social media perform an important role in unifying cultures (Zarella, 2010).

Online chatter is easier for firms to measure and monitor than traditional media. This has high visibility and the impact of online chatter can be catastrophic for negative events. Collaboration and community are important characteristics of web development and are key features of social communication services like social networks (E.g. my space, Facebook and LinkedIn). Religious conflicts are conflicts between religious groups often as a result of religious unity, nationalism, and ethnic hatred (Andrew, 2006).

The use of social media such as Internet and mobile phones enabled the “silent majority” (silent either by oppression or lack of good governance) to stand for their rights. In Egypt social marginalization can be considered as a root cause of conflicts illustrated by the fact that, while around 150,000 businessmen and their families lived in exclusive resorts around Cairo, millions of people lived in 1500 slums) People were aware of the fact that, if the government could not solve the problem within a reasonable time



frame, a conflict would have occurred (Judith, 1997). Indeed, the young generation benefited greatly from using ICTs thanks to increased access to information, freedom of expression, and dissemination of information. At the same time, ICTs contributed to the promotion of peace, being the most obvious instrument among people using it on a daily basis (Taylor & Quayle, 2003).

Online chatter is a social media platform and has been a topic of considerable importance to marketing researchers and practitioners for several reasons. Research has shown that online chatter may have higher credibility, empathy, and relevance to customers than marketer-created resources of information (Mugenda, 2009).

Hate messages are defined as bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics. It expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes towards those characteristics, which include gender, race, religion, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation. Hate speech is intended to injure, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade and victimize the targeted groups, and to foment insensitivity and brutality against them.

However, in practice, legal definitions of hate speech tend to place questions of race and ethnic origin, and religion and philosophical belief in the foreground, with increasing attention being paid to sexuality, but relatively little being paid to gender, or “disability”. For instance, Denmark defines hate speech as publicly making statements that threaten, ridicule, or hold in contempt a group due to race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, faith, or sexual orientation (Monty, 2003).

Accordingly, this study examines whether the protections provided against hate speech are a sufficient response to the challenge arising from the specific nature of expression on social media. The distinctive characteristics of social media play a key role and provide an ideal venue to target and reach a wide audience across the globe. (Mesfin, 2011).

Hate media is used to encourage ‘violent activities, tension, or hatred between races, ethnic or social groups, or countries for political goals and/or to foster conflict by offering a one-sided or biased view or opinion, and/or resorting to deception.⁵³ The use of hate media can cause incitement to attitudes, which provides grounds for action to take place—for instance Nazi Germany used propaganda to inspire racial hatred, which subsequently resulted in the Holocaust.

Goldstein and Rotich (2009) stated that digitally networked technologies ‘were a catalyst to predatory behavior such as ethnic-based mob violence and civic behavior such as citizen journalism and human rights campaigns’ during the post-election crisis. ‘Like SMS, cyberspace-based discussions were also



fed on rumors and misinformation from the press.’ The majority of those who participated in these discussions were pro-Raila Odinga and expressed despair for the ‘failure of democracy’ (Kelman, 2009).

Methodology

The research was conducted to identify the social media impact on the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. This is quantitative research. The questionnaire was distributed to 150 convenience samples in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire was distributed through the google doc form. The questionnaire was analyzed through SPSS.

Results and Discussions

Regression analysis is one of the major analysis systems in quantitative research to analyze the relationship between variables. Under the umbrella of regression analysis is used to describe the relationship between several independent variables and dependent variables. By identifying the independent variables, at the same time, also separates their impacts on dependent variables and indicates which variables really matter.

Table :1 ANOVA Regression Analysis

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	102.229	4	25.557	61.597	0.000
Residual	122.398	295	0.415		
Total	224.626	299			

a. Predictors: (Constant), OC_avg, HM_avg, I_avg

b. Dependent Variable: RC

Table 1 describes the ANOVA test results. It produced the P value denoted by “sig” is .000. This obviously indicates the significant value denoted as an alpha value below 0.05. It explains that all four factors used in the research are statistically significant to improve and predict the outcome of the dependent variable.

Table: 2. Coefficient Regression Analysis

	Coefficients B	t	Sig	1/VIF
(Constant)	0.461	2.612	0.009	
OC_avg	0.295	3.991	0.000	1.472
HM_avg	0.365	5.647	0.000	1.281
I_avg	0.276	3.865	0.000	1.500

Dependent Variable: RC



This finding indicates that all three factors significantly influence the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. This research was conducted according to the case study in Kandy. Online chatter has a positive influence on religious conflicts in the case of Kandy, Sri Lanka. But this indicates that the negative online chatter is powerful as the beta value is 0.295. The Hate messages have positive significance towards the religious conflicts as the P value is less than 0.05. This can indicate as the most influential factor as the beta value is 0.365 and the Incitements positively influence the religious conflicts in the case of Kandy. The P value is less than 0.05 and the beta value is 0.276.

Largely the findings of this research show that media is a powerful tool that could be used to manage conflict and could also propagate conflict, as indicated by the study results. The blog sites which are used by social media to interact and inform others could also have an effect on peace if the messages used are inciting or hate speech. Internet access has greatly affected conflict management as war is crafted virtually on this platform. The mainstream media is faced with the challenge of bringing accurate news and editing other parts which could affect the news. This kind of reporting has made it hard for the members of the fourth state to keep their customers informed as sometimes they are forced to hide the truth. Social media is therefore a double-edged sword that could work either to promote peace or destroy it.

The internet offers a new means of communication; many hate groups now publish hate information online. For instance, Pierce, the author of *The Turner Diaries*, recognized the potential of the internet and subsequently created websites on which he could publish racist viewpoints. There has been a growth in hate sites on the internet; this growth can be associated with the anonymity offered by the internet, as it allows for opinions not supported by all members of the public - such as those of racial hate groups - to be voiced.⁸¹ Furthermore, the internet breaks down traditional geographical borders⁸² meaning that such opinions reach a wider audience. With the above-mentioned information and the P value of the online chatter, it has a value of less than 0.05 and indicates that Online chatter has a significant influence on religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. The H1 is accepted.

Goldstein and Rotich (2009) continue in the same vein by stating that digitally networked technologies 'were a catalyst to predatory behaviors such as ethnic-based mob violence and civic behavior such as citizen journalism and human rights campaigns' during the post-election crisis. (Goldstein & Rotich, 2009). It is indicating that hate messages have a positive influence on the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. The P value of the Hate messages is below 0.05 as it indicates 0.000. The H2 is accepted in this research.

The other significant concern is the difficulty of ensuring the reliability and accountability of facts and information disseminated through the Internet. "Facts" are usually circulated with proposed actions, as



we have seen in the Arab uprising. Social media users often ignore the accuracy of the information and are not interested in verifying or contextualizing the information provided. This lack of accuracy and/or false information on the Internet could lead to the promotion of conflicts.

Inaccurate or misleading information can have serious consequences on conflicts arising. Even basic issues concerning the quality of information can make people feel that sharing information will entail a risk to their credibility and security. The factor incitement is positively significant as the P value is below than 0.05. The H3 is accepted in this research. Social media has the freedom to share and create news more than all the other media platforms. Social media can reach more people and it has large access to many people with the message. It can create any ideology in society as it has the power to talk to each and every person personally with their own perspectives. This could also support misleading society and distract people. This research investigates social media behavior and its impact on the internal religious conflict in Sri Lanka. The majority of Sri Lankans are Buddhists and there are two major minorities such as Tamil and Muslim. This research explains social media behavior and how it makes an impact on this religious conflict that recently occurred in Kandy, Sri Lanka. This research mainly indicates that social media has the best freedom for the majority and minority to make their voices on the same platform. More the results indicate that social media create like hood subgroups and it has to distract impact on society. In another hand, the results indicate that social media can create a more negative impact subjectively. Furthermore, indicates that it can increase conflict situations as it could create different news without accuracy.

The main three factors indicate that it positively affects the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. It is very interesting to find out that education level doesn't have an impact on online chatter, hate messages, or incitements in social media.

Sri Lankan people should have more knowledge of the social media platform and the kind of restrictions for discrimination. This authority is going to Sri Lankan government and the government should take decisions on this point. The government can ban social media temporarily in such kind of situations. Then the traditional media should have a space for all the people.

Conclusions and Contributions

This case study examined the social media voices over the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. Three main variables have been taken in this research and the dependent variable. This research only used three main factors, and in the future, the researchers can be extended and take more independent variables. This research is only finding out the religious conflicts and, in the future, it can compare more conflicts in the world. This research is geographically limited to Sri Lanka. But this can be done in the future as a comparative study with another country.



This research was conducted to investigate the overview of the social media voices regarding the religious conflicts in Sri Lanka. The research was done as qualitative research to investigate the factors affecting religious conflicts through social media platforms. Sri Lankan social media is uncontrolled, and the people have great freedom to express their thoughts, feelings, etc. This research indicates that in this case study, online chatter, hate messages and incitements have a positive impact on the religious conflict in Sri Lanka.

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