



Turning the Tap Off: The Impacts of Social Media Shutdown After Sri Lanka's Easter Attacks

Amarnath Amarasingam & Rukshana Rizwie



International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism - The Hague



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Turning the Tap Off: The Impacts of Social Media Shutdown After Sri Lanka’s Easter Attacks

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Strategic Communications Project Report

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This report is part of a wider project, led by the International Centre for Counter- Terrorism (ICCT) – the Hague, and funded by the EU Devco on “Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism”. This project aims to produce evidence-based guidance and capacity building outputs based on original, context-sensitive research into the risks and opportunities in media reporting of terrorism and terrorist incidents. The role of media reporting on terrorism has been under investigated and is an underutilised dimension of a holistic counter-terrorism strategy. How the media reports on terrorism has the potential to impact counter-terrorism (CT) perspective positively or negatively.



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Key Findings

What should government and policymakers do after an attack?

Communicate government actions transparently.

The government should deliver clear, centralised public service announcements regarding terrorist attacks and the plan of action they are going to undertake.

Strategically counter terrorist propaganda and disinformation.¹

The widespread use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) in Sri Lanka and the resultant patchwork nature of the social media shutdown shows that citizens use social media to gather information and interpret events regardless of a ban being in place. The government should redirect its efforts towards providing strategic counter-messaging on social media rather than trying to shut social media down entirely.

What should government and policymakers do to proactively prevent misinformation related to the attack?

Mandate greater accountability from companies who create these platforms.

The Sri Lankan government should encourage efforts from social media companies to develop infrastructure that can remove certain harmful content that incites violence in the country from their platforms.

Develop a clear, comprehensive communication plan for emergencies.

The Sri Lankan government should develop a clear communication plan to prepare for future attacks, including the potential spread of misinformation and disinformation online. This communication strategy should include strategic counter-messaging described above.

Raise awareness of misinformation and improve public digital hygiene.

It is important that Sri Lanka sets up communication channels that would regularly address the public and identify false information. Government and policymakers should also support organisations that educate the public on mis- and disinformation and establish best practices to perform their own verification checks.

What can journalists, activists and media agencies do to combat misinformation?

Increase fact-checking culture amongst journalists and the public.

Credible media and journalists are instrumental in fighting mis- and disinformation. Building the capacity of journalists and social media influencers to know when mis- and disinformation is being spread and giving them the tools to push back in real time is important in Sri Lanka, where local events can quickly spiral out of control.

Improve internet hygiene through increasing awareness and media literacy in the general public.

Journalists, activists, and media agencies should play a part in alerting the general public to the existence and danger of fake news and help equip them with the skills to take in information critically.

Prevent political interference.

Cultivating journalistic integrity and professionalism fosters non-biased and non-partisan content. Producing a less polarised landscape for media allows the general public to trust information they are consuming.

Introduction

On Easter Sunday 2019, eight coordinated explosive devices went off at popular hotels and historical churches across Sri Lanka, from the capital city of Colombo to coastal cities in the west and towns in the east.² More than 250 were killed in the carnage. Soon after, the Islamic State (ISIS) claimed the attacks by releasing, through their official channels on Telegram, the *kunyas* (*noms de guerre*), photos, and videos of the attackers. The Sri Lankan government—in an approach it had also taken with prior incidents of violence and communal unrest—decided to temporarily shut down social media platforms. They argued that these platforms could be used to spread disinformation and perhaps, even facilitate the planning of further attacks.³ Affected services were Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, as well as messaging applications like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. In addition, network data showed that the associated backend servers of each platform were blocked by some providers.⁴

This is not the first time that Sri Lanka has taken such measures, nor are such measures unusual in the region more generally — take India, for example, where the internet was shut down in Kashmir for months under the pretence of preventing “propagation of terror activities” and the “circulation of inflammatory materials.”⁵ In March 2018, Sri Lanka also temporarily restricted access to social media platforms after the so-called Kandy riots. Since then, the Sri Lankan government has blocked key social media platforms on three separate occasions,

¹ In this paper, we follow the UNESCO definitions of misinformation and disinformation: Disinformation is “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country”, while misinformation is “information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm.” More information available here: <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

² Amarnath Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, Volume 12, Issue 5, May/June 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorism-teardrop-island-understanding-easter-2019-attacks-sri-lanka/>

³ Al Jazeera “Sri Lanka bombings: All the latest updates,” May 2, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/sri-lanka-bombings-latest-updates-190421092621543.html>

⁴ “Social media blocked again in Sri Lanka amid ethnic clashes,” NetBlocks, May 5, 2019 <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-blocked-again-in-sri-lanka-eBOgWDBZ>

⁵ Kai Schultz and Sameer Yasir, “India Restores Some Internet Access in Kashmir After Long Shutdown,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/world/asia/kashmir-internet-shutdown-india.html>

including after the Easter Sunday attacks. The role of social media in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka, which often spurred on this kind of communal violence, is not new.⁶ As early as 2013, bizarre conspiracy theories were floated on Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups about the Muslim community, and their “secret plots” to sterilise the Sinhalese population so they could have more babies and become the majority population in Sri Lanka.⁷ Online platforms have played a particularly harmful role in amplifying this sentiment and causing retaliatory violence in the country.⁸

Social media platforms have increasingly become a playground for misinformation, especially in the midst of a terrorist attack or instances of communal violence. This poses substantial challenges for journalists, academics, and activists who are dependent on these social media platforms for accurate information—especially in a country like Sri Lanka where state actors sometimes have disproportionate influence over how traditional news is covered and presented. As such, shutdowns can come with social costs as the spread of accurate information, produced by journalists and researchers, is limited along with misinformation, and family members and friends find it difficult to ensure that their loved ones are safe in the midst of chaos.⁹

Methodology

Sri Lanka is an interesting case study for understanding how social media shutdowns have been carried out and whether they had any impact at all on citizens and journalists who rely on information from these platforms. This case study, then, will focus on how journalists and activists experienced and responded to the various social media shutdowns in Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on the shutdowns that occurred after the Kandy riots of March 2018 and the Easter attacks of April 2019.

Interviews took place in the months following the Easter attacks from mid-2019 to early 2020. We recruited interviewees through purposeful sampling, looking across media outlets to include journalists, editors, activists, researchers, and other digital specialists across Sri Lanka. We conducted 13 key informant interviews, some of which were conducted face-to-face and others conducted over the phone. The interviews were then transcribed and thematically coded for analysis.

The report focuses on the outcomes of the Sri Lankan government’s decision to shut down social media following the Easter attacks for journalists, researchers, and activists. As we describe below, many found the social media shutdown only somewhat effective in

limiting misinformation and propaganda, especially given the prevalence of virtual private networks and fears among citizens about undue and unjust government influence on news media.

Findings

The Impact of the Shutdown on Journalists

While media coverage outside of Sri Lanka often presented the social media shutdown following the Easter attacks as alarming, it was actually not an altogether new response to crisis in Sri Lanka. During the course of our interviews, this was almost always the first point made by our interview participants. Our respondents recounted the March 2018 anti-Muslim riots in Kandy as the first time the government blocked social media. While one journalist mentioned finding out about the shutdown from a WhatsApp group alert that informed members of the coming blockage, many did not find out about the shutdown until it occurred, sometimes without explanation.

Initial Limiting of Emergency and Rescue Services and Communication

Interviewees were affected by the shutdowns in different ways. While some noted that they did not use social media in a personal capacity, several shared common concerns with many people in the country such as not being able to connect with loved ones locally and abroad, and not being able to receive much-needed safety and security updates. Moreover, cutting communications channels can potentially block emergency and rescue services from being able to reach affected people.¹⁰ As one activist noted, after the Kandy riots, it was difficult to help affected areas:

“I was in Digana (near Kandy) reacting to the incident. I stayed over for three to four days. I was trying to contact friends for urgent needs, dry rations, clothing. There were many people in shelters and their immediate needs had to be met. On the other hand, there was also a security risk and there were people who were beaten up. When the communication means were restricted, it was very difficult.”¹¹

Parallel concerns were noted with the social media shutdown after the Easter attacks. By shutting down access to Facebook, the Sri Lankan government also barred access to Facebook’s ‘safety check’ feature,

6 Merin Shobhana Xavier and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Caught Between Rebels and Armies: Competing Nationalisms and Anti-Muslim Violence in Sri Lanka.” *Islamophobia Studies Yearbook*. Volume 7, 2016. Available: https://www.academia.edu/25280912/Caught_Between_Rebels_and_Armies_Competing_Nationalisms_and_Anti-Muslim_Violence_in_Sri_Lanka

7 Amarnath Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, Volume 12, Issue 5, May/June 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorism-teardrop-island-understanding-easter-2019-attacks-sri-lanka/>

8 Megha Rajagopalan and Aisha Nazim, “We Had To Stop Facebook’: When Anti-Muslim Violence Goes Viral,” *Buzzfeed*, April 7, 2018. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/we-had-to-stop-facebook-when-anti-muslim-violence-goes-viral>.

9 Grant Gross, “Sri Lankan Shutdown Web-Based Services Creates Huge Social Costs,” *Internet Society*, March 26 2018, <https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2018/03/sri-lankan-shutdown-web-based-services-creates-huge-social-costs/>

10 Berhan Taye, “Sri Lanka: shutting down social media to fight rumors hurts victims,” *Access Now*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.accessnow.org/sri-lanka-shutting-down-social-media-to-fight-rumors-hurts-victims/>

11 Interview with activist in Kandy (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

used to indicate one's safety to friends and family during a crisis.¹² Further, the shutdown may have prevented citizens from accessing critical updates from the government regarding the attacks.

Initial Limiting of Independent Reporting and Story Verification

Unsurprisingly, the journalists we interviewed pointed out that they were also impacted professionally. When user-generated information over social media started to dry up, it had a major impact on receiving stories, verifying and fact-checking incidents, and reporting on them in usual ways. As one journalist told us, referring to the social media blockage after the March 2018 riots:

“That user-generated content of what was going on around one's surrounding was not flowing as it ordinarily did. We used that information, verified it, cross checked it and then relied on that information. Here nothing was coming through and it was frustrating not knowing what was going on, despite having people in those areas.”¹³

Other journalists noted that they routinely used a wide-ranging network of colleagues on social media to piece together an authentic news story. This is a particularly common practice in Sri Lanka, according to our respondents, because the mainstream media is often heavily influenced by government interests and interference. While social media is often framed as a site where terrorism and violent extremism is fostered through disinformation, in media cultures such as Sri Lanka, social media platforms allow independent journalists to hold state-influenced news organisations accountable. “Having worked in mainstream media—I don't trust the mainstream media,” one journalist remarked, “I prefer to reach out to journalists on the ground for my news. Their hard work later gets pruned to fit the narratives of the politicized position of the media they work for—whose output can't be trusted.”¹⁴ As such, user-generated content directly from the ground—which was severely limited following the social media shutdown—is enormously valuable to Sri Lankan journalists.

Working Around the Social Media Shutdown

It did not take long, however, for most activists and journalists to develop a workaround. Following the March 2018 shutdown, all respondents noted that they became quite adept at using virtual private networks (VPNs). This workaround, which became commonplace

after the Kandy riots, ensured that the blockage following the Easter attacks a year later did not have the same impact on the flow of information.¹⁵ The knowledge and use of VPNs by communication specialists exploded following the shutdowns, according to interviewees. In fact, Google searches for “VPN” spiked in Sri Lanka at the time.¹⁶ Some interviewees noted that people learned about VPNs through social media platforms that appeared to be less popular and remained fully available, such as Twitter.

Even for some international diplomats working in Sri Lanka whom we spoke with, the social media shutdown proved quite disorienting.¹⁷ They were able to piece together information following the Easter attacks by paying attention to state media and social media through VPNs, but some of our respondents noted that there was immense uncertainty, immediately after the attacks, about the death toll and where different attacks were happening. According to one journalist we interviewed, who was reporting from the ground immediately after the Easter attacks, getting a VPN downloaded onto their phone and computer also proved difficult. After initial success in logging on, free and easy-to-access VPNs were blocked or corrupted, and citizens had to find technological workarounds in order to continue to receive information. Indeed, the fact that the government was blocking these sites created a mysterious aura around them, and individuals who weren't even on social media now wanted to see what they were missing. As this journalist told us:

“The more the government clamped down on social media, the more people found ways to get back online. Even individuals who were not social media savvy or who were not regular consumers of social media were suddenly interested. The Sri Lankan mentality is such that when the government blocked certain matters, ordinary individuals wanted to know more. It heightened interest around social media and the news that was circulating on social media. The more the government blocked it we noticed, and I saw for myself, people seeking ways to stay online even if they didn't need to.”¹⁸

Limiting Disinformation or Limiting Dissent?

In general, most of our interviewees were accustomed to the notion that social media can and has been exploited in Sri Lanka to spread disinformation and targeted harassment of minority communities, and felt, accordingly, that the government was somewhat justified in the action it took to shutdown social media

¹² Rob Lever, “Sri Lanka social media shutdown raises fears on free expression,” AFP via Yahoo News, April 22, 2019. <https://news.yahoo.com/sri-lanka-social-media-shutdown-raises-fears-free-172140320.html>

¹³ Interview with journalist in Colombo (requested anonymity), December 19, 2019.

¹⁴ Interview with journalist (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

¹⁵ Devana Senanayake and Emily Tamkin. “Why some Sri Lankans welcomed the social media ban after bombings,” Washington Post, April, 23, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/04/23/why-some-sri-lankans-welcomed-social-media-ban-after-bombings/>

¹⁶ Yudhanjaya Wijeratne. “The Social Media Block Isn't Helping Sri Lanka,” Slate, April 25, 2019, <https://slate.com/technology/2019/04/sri-lanka-social-media-block-disinformation.html>

¹⁷ Interview with international diplomat (requested anonymity), December 12, 2019

¹⁸ Interview with journalist (requested anonymity), December 12, 2019.

in the wake of the attacks. The spread of disinformation and incitement of violence via social media has been well documented and many of the journalists we spoke with do agree that harmful information has not only been spread in Sri Lanka, but has also produced real violence on the ground.¹⁹ Some interviewees believed that the government was, first and foremost, trying to safeguard the community. Others noted that because an ISIS-inspired attack in Sri Lanka was entirely unprecedented, shutting down social media could also have limited the spread of ISIS propaganda in the country, as the group tried to capitalise on the attacks and the aftermath.²⁰ For others, the move by the government was largely the right one simply because Sri Lanka lacked the resources to monitor individual pieces of content to determine whether they were dangerous. An attack of this scale, by a perpetrator who had never targeted Sri Lanka before and one that most ordinary Sri Lankans did not follow closely, meant that citizens were more willing to tolerate measures by the government that would have, in other circumstances, produced widespread dissent. Additionally, because of the brutality of the attack, the assumption was that anti-Muslim violence was going to descend on the country like never before. As such, some felt that maybe the social media shutdown had some benefits, even if not immediately quantifiable.

A majority of journalists and activists felt that shutdowns can be more harmful than helpful, making the events on the ground and the government response less transparent, making it harder to keep those in power accountable. Some felt this lack of transparency was intentional and the government benefited from ensuring that they were the only voice providing information during the crisis. Such sentiments point to the larger state of distrust towards the government and other state apparatuses that exists in Sri Lanka. As one journalist told us:

“I think shutting down any form of expression is problematic. In 2018, for example, I was in Kandy when the violence erupted, and I could see that the situation at that moment required measures to be taken to contain the violence or prevent further harm. One has to be careful about this area, one can't just shut down social media.”²¹

A digital media analyst we spoke with argued that having access to information was his right, and the government had no right to limit it. As he noted, “I felt deeply deprived and denied of my right to information and my right to freedom of expression—both of which I value highly.”²² Indeed, if successive governments in Sri Lanka had gained the trust of their citizenry, shown their concern for minority communities, and did not spread

misinformation themselves, then their insistence that social media platforms were shut down to prevent the spread of misinformation and violence would have been better received. Context matters, and for most activists and journalists we interviewed, some of whom have been harassed themselves, seeing the government as a benevolent actor in this instance proved difficult.

The Impact of the Shutdown on Post-Incident Communal Violence

Safeguarding Muslims or Shielding the Government?

Reflecting further on some of the advantages and disadvantages of the shutdowns, participants weighed government intention with impact. In terms of advantages, a primary reason cited by the government was to limit the spread of fake news and misinformation, particularly narratives targeting the Muslim community. According to most of our respondents, this initiative worked slightly after the March 2018 Kandy riots, but by the time of the Easter attacks, the widespread use of VPNs essentially meant that everyone knew how to circumvent any restrictions put in place. As such, the information flow largely carried on uninterrupted. As Nalaka Gunawardene has written:

“If we agree for a moment that both blockings were initially warranted for ensuring law and order, they quickly outlived their justification within 48 to 72 hours. Sustaining them for several days longer was purely a political decision, probably to contain severe criticism of the President and government who, in the view of many, did too little, too late.”²³

The main reason given for the shutdown, as noted above, was that it would potentially limit violence and anti-Muslim mobilisation on the ground. WhatsApp and Facebook have previously been used by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and extremist groups like the Bodu Bala Sena to galvanise supporters, rile up communal sentiment, and spark several episodes of violence.²⁴ While some of our respondents agreed that this might have helped, others were more sceptical. They noted that communal violence in Sri Lanka far predates social media platforms, and that simply blocking social media is not a quick fix to what are, at base, historical and structural issues.²⁵ Indeed, what has often led to the reduction of violence are videos of communal violence going viral internationally, international human rights organisations calling for an end to mistreatment of minority communities, and those in law enforcement

19 Shilpa Samarathunge and Sanjana Hattotuwa, “Liking Violence: A Study of Hate Speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka,” Centre for Policy Alternatives Report, September 24, 2014. <https://www.cpalanka.org/liking-violence-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-in-sri-lanka/>. Here, we use disinformation in accordance with UNESCO's distinction between misinformation, mal-information, and disinformation, that latter constituting false information deliberately spread to target a specific person, group, organization, or country. See Cherylyn Ireton and Julie Posetti, Journalism, “Fake News,” & Disinformation, UNESCO, 2018. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552>

20 Amarnath Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka,” Combating Terrorism Center, Volume 12, Issue 5, May/June 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorism-teardrop-island-understanding-easter-2019-attacks-sri-lanka/>

21 Interview with activist in Kandy (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

22 Interview with activist in Colombo (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

23 Nalaka Gunawardene, “Say no to cyber-nanny state in Sri Lanka,” Daily FT, May 9, 2019. <http://www.ft.lk/columns/Say-no-to-cyber-nanny-state-in-Sri-Lanka/4-677845>

24 Megha Rajagopalan and Aisha Nazim, “We Had To stop Facebook’: When Anti-Muslim Violence Goes Viral,” BuzzFeed, April 7, 2018. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/we-had-to-stop-facebook-when-anti-muslim-violence-goes-viral>

25 Amarnath Amarasingam and Daniel Bass, eds. Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War. (London: Hurst and Co., 2016)

being exposed for complicity. In this instance, blocking social media, to some of our more cynical respondents, had more to do with the government protecting itself than protecting vulnerable citizens.²⁶

For some interviewees, the government decision at best accomplished nothing and at worst caused more harm than good. One of our respondents observed that if the government shut down of social media is thought to have worked, then the government should explain why there was a week of very bloody anti-Muslim violence following the Easter attacks.²⁷ Mob violence against Muslims in the week following the Easter attack clearly persisted despite the social media shutdown, though it remains unclear whether or not disinformation on social media, accessed through VPN workarounds, could have motivated the violence.²⁸ In mid-May, mob violence against Muslims broke out in the Northwest town of Chilaw, allegedly in response to Facebook comments posted by a Muslim businessman, which were interpreted as calling for more attacks against Christians.²⁹ This incident then incited similar mob attacks across the Northwest of the country, with hundreds of Muslim homes, stores, and mosques destroyed. In response, the government again imposed a social media shutdown and instituted a nationwide curfew. While some of the violence clearly emerged organically in response to social media, the mob violence also provided cover for coordinated anti-Muslim attacks and settling of feuds.³⁰ It is strange that the Sri Lankan government was so quick to address misinformation and disinformation in the online space, but was then completely unprepared for violence in the streets.

Persistent Misinformation and Hate-Mongering

An issue that all interviewees agreed on was that misinformation was spread irrespective of the shutdown.³¹ For example, a false image supposedly portraying the ‘youngest victim’ of the Easter attacks, still circulated on Facebook in Sri Lanka following the social media ban.³² One journalist stated that individuals who are intent on causing harm will “somehow find a way to get the job done” with or without a social media ban.³³ Others noted that such social media bans only served to drive hatemongers further underground. Rather, these individuals and networks should be monitored and tracked closely—and this can only be done if they are

allowed to remain on the banned mainstream platforms. In this way, much of the debate in Sri Lanka following the social media blockages followed larger debates in terrorism studies about how to properly deal with hate speech and violent content online.³⁴

Overall, interviewees recognised that the situation immediately after an attack or period of unrest is fluid and complex. However, there were also important critiques levelled against the government for not having a plan in place for communal unrest—even though this unrest has frequently occurred in the country since independence. The government, they argue, seem more concerned with maintaining their public image abroad than having a strategy in place to respond effectively. As one respondent noted, the country has yet to have an “open and honest policy debate” on how emergency situations should be handled.

Future Challenges Going Forward

The increasing use of social media platforms in Sri Lanka—especially Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp groups—means that any disruption in their service has impacts not just for journalists and writers, but citizens as well.³⁵ This paper aimed to better elucidate how journalists, researchers, and activists responded to the government’s decision to shut down social media platforms following the Kandy riots of March 2018 and the Easter attacks of April 2019. In other words, we want to discern whether they changed the way they worked or altered their overall behaviour in the online space.

According to most of our respondents, the social media ban had very little impact on their behaviour online. This was largely due to the fact that many were exceedingly careful to begin with. Being an activist or a journalist in Sri Lanka always involved risks, and so most of these individuals had taken precautions to protect themselves and their work long before the Kandy riots. Some respondents had always had separate accounts for their professional work and their personal lives and, as one journalist noted, tried very hard to avoid “bringing in my personal character” on to the platforms. In this and other ways, they had “always been very careful.”³⁶

26 Zubair, C. Malge, F. Shakira, T. Hadgie, S. Rameez, and A. Nijamdeen, “Is the state grossly underestimating the losses from the mob violence in Kandy?” Groundviews, June 24, 2018. <https://groundviews.org/author/l-zubair-c-malge-f-shakira-t-hadgie-s-rameez-and-a/>

27 Amarnath Amarasingam and Lisa Fuller, “Sri Lanka is Burning – again.” The Washington Post, May 17, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/17/sri-lanka-is-burning-again/>

28 Jeffrey Gettleman and Dharisha Bastians, “Sri Lanka Muslims Face an Angry Backlash After Easter Sunday Attacks,” New York Times, April 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/world/asia/sri-lankas-muslims.html>

29 “Fresh curfews, social media block in Sri Lanka,” Bangkok Post, May 13, 2019. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1676860/fresh-curfews-social-media-block-in-sri-lanka-after-riots>

30 Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka is Burning.”

31 Maneshka Borham and Dimuthu Attanayake, “Tension in Ampara after fake ‘sterilization pills’ controversy,” Sunday Observer, March 4, 2018. <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2018/03/04/news/tension-ampara-after-fake-%E2%80%98sterilization-pills%E2%80%99-controversy>

32 Daniel Funke and Susan Benkelman, “Sri Lanka blocked social media to stop misinformation about the Easter terror attacks. But it didn’t work,” Poynter, April 25, 2019. <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/sri-lanka-blocked-social-media-to-stop-misinformation-about-the-easter-terror-attacks-but-it-didnt-work/>

33 Interview with journalist in Colombo (requested anonymity), December 12, 2019.

34 Brian Fishman, “Crossroads: Counterterrorism and the Internet.” Texas National Security Review. Volume 2, Issue 2 (February 2019): <https://tnsr.org/2019/02/crossroads-counter-terrorism-and-the-internet/>

35 Thuseethan, Selvarajah, and Shanmuganatha Vasanthapriyan, “Social media as a new trend in Sri Lankan digital journalism: A surveillance.” Asian Social Science 11.10 (2015): 86. <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ass/article/view/47756>

36 Interview with journalist and activist in Colombo (requested anonymity), December 8, 2019.

Several journalists and activists, however, assumed that government surveillance of their work was the norm. One journalist noted that he had once deleted his entire Facebook account when Mahinda Rajapaksa was appointed as Prime Minister, based on the assumption that his anti-government views were being monitored and could put him or his family in danger. Rajapaksa—the current Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, who also served as President of the country from 2005 to 2015—has been accused, alongside his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa—the current President—of severely limiting journalistic freedom. Both have also been implicated in a series of abductions and killings of anti-government journalists and activists.³⁷ Over time, though, our interviews revealed that Sri Lankan journalists' fear of top-down government surveillance has evolved to also include concerns about the threat of bottom-up, organic, fake news and misinformation that also erode a healthy media culture.

Unsurprisingly, those we spoke to singled out WhatsApp groups and message-forwarding behaviour as largely responsible for the continued spread of false information in the country. Individuals in politically-orientated WhatsApp groups are routinely forwarding content to their friends and families without any fact-checking or attempt to gauge whether the content is accurate.³⁸ As this content is forwarded from a family member or friend, the information is often taken as more trustworthy, as having been vetted.³⁹ For this reason, many activists and social media scholars in the country have called for more education in Sri Lanka around social media literacy, teaching citizens where information comes from, how it goes viral, and to spend a few moments checking the veracity of content before sharing it.⁴⁰

Another major concern touched on by our respondents was the way in which journalists themselves are letting their own racial and ethnic biases affect their reporting. There was consensus among those we interviewed that this kind of racial and ethnic bias is playing a significant role in Sri Lankan media and leading to polarising coverage. Participants expressed a particular concern for the way the media is “racially in two different corners” and how journalists and editors are bringing their own “ethnic and religious biases into their reporting” with no “attempt to correct themselves or overcome the issue.”⁴¹ The ethnic and religious tapestry in Sri Lanka is quite complex, and is affected by several decades of ethnic strife. For example, many Tamils in the north of the country, the former war zones, often complain

about how their grievances and struggles are portrayed by “the Colombo elite” and how “out of touch” some commentators are with the realities on the ground.⁴²

Respondents pointed to the Easter attacks and the aftermath as a key example: the Sinhala-language press, they note, often evinced “anti-Muslim sentiment, which gained momentum” in several parts of the country, and might have contributed to the week of violence that followed the Easter attacks.⁴³ According to one respondent, “racism is so deeply embedded in our society” that the journalists' own biased outlook also informs the way they report these stories.⁴⁴ This bias, according to interviewees, has led to a general lack of professionalism in the Sri Lankan media, which includes ethnic bias but also extends to a lack of fact checking, sensationalism—especially in coverage of terrorism—and includes instances where “media ethics have been violated.”⁴⁵

Respondents noted repeatedly that rumours that started on social media platforms were entering mainstream media with no verification of sources. The social media shutdown after the Easter attacks, because of all the VPN workarounds that were in place, did not slow down this phenomenon. As such, there is concern for a lack of responsible reporting, especially when it comes to issues, like race, ethnicity, and religion, that have often resulted in riots and communal violence.

One respondent, discussing how the media is not playing the independent role that it should, noted the recent case of the abduction of a Swiss embassy employee.⁴⁶ When the Criminal Investigation Unit (CID) failed to release official information, media outlets were unable to counter fake news and what unfolded was the manipulation of events to suit a political agenda—namely that the international community was interfering in domestic politics through “made up” stories. A journalist we spoke with expressed concern about the lack of verification tools in the hands of the general public and stated that fake news is “presented to them [the public] to feel real and accurate” making it much more complicated for the average citizen to responsibly consume media.⁴⁷ Responding to disinformation in the wake of the Easter attacks should thus be seen more broadly in the context of Sri Lankan media culture that suffers from a lack of digital literacy and media ethics. There was also overall concern for the monitoring of social media content by the platforms themselves. Respondents felt that by allowing untrue content to spread and go viral, despite being flagged by users,

37 Tasnim Nazeer, “Sri Lanka’s Missing and Murdered Journalists: A Call for Press Freedom and Justice,” *The Byline Times*, January 29, 2020. <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/01/29/sri-lankas-missing-and-murdered-journalists-a-call-for-press-freedom-and-justice/>

38 Interview with journalist in Colombo (requested anonymity), December 19, 2019.

39 See Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), for an argument that social forces are key in the spread of misinformation online. The social tendency of people to avoid disagreeing with others and to trust the judgment of others over their own – conformity – seems to play a large role in the spread of misinformation (p. 81).

40 Interview with journalist and activist in Colombo (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

41 Interview with journalist in Colombo, November 8, 2019. For an earlier example, see Sunanda Deshpriya, “Ethnic bias in Sri Lanka’s mainstream media,” *The Hoot*, October 2, 2003. <http://asu.thehoot.org/media-watch/media-practice/ethnic-bias-in-sri-lanka-s-mainstream-media-656>.

42 Senthana Selvarajah, “Threat Image Construction in the Sri Lankan Media and its Implications for Peace Communication.” In Amarnath Amarasingam and Daniel Bass, eds. *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War*. (London: Hurst and Co., 2016) pp. 73-91.

43 Amarnath Amarasingam and Lisa Fuller, “Sri Lanka is Burning – again.” *The Washington Post*. May 17, 2019. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/17/sri-lanka-is-burning-again/>

44 Interview with journalist and activist in Colombo (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

45 Ibid.

46 BBC. “Sri Lankan worker at Swiss Embassy Arrested Over Kidnap Claim.” December 16, 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50815439>

47 Interview with journalist in Colombo (requested anonymity), December 12, 2019.

these platforms were feeding into a climate of violence. One interviewee gave the example of a viral post by an account linked to the singer Iraj. Soon after the mail-in votes were concluded during the 2019 presidential election, a post was released on Iraj's account with some fake figures of the final count. Even after the official results were released, this interviewee claims, this post was not taken down by Facebook even though there were numerous complaints and it was clearly untrue.⁴⁸ The general lack of accountability by companies such as Facebook, respondents argue, has led to a degradation of trust in these platforms.⁴⁹

In general, many interviewees agree that there is a need for greater accountability when it comes to media institutions in the country. They noted that there needs to be better public “digital hygiene” as hate speech, disinformation, body shaming, misogynist content, and cyber bullying continued to flow through social media platforms, in the everyday and after terrorist attacks such as the Easter bombings. Currently, only a minority of social media users are aware of the increasing amount of misinformation that they are exposed to daily. All of our respondents called for the creation of a stronger fact-checking culture amongst journalists and the public. The public, especially, should understand that not everything they read on the internet, and not every piece of content sent to them by relatives and friends is vetted and trustworthy.⁵⁰ This needs to be supplemented with important changes in media culture as well—pushing back against government control of the news, not reporting viral social media posts as if they are factual news stories, and being cognisant of how certain stories are being used by extremist groups in the country to bring about violence against minority communities.⁵¹ This broader shift in media culture would also reduce the proliferation of misinformation and hatemongering in the aftermath of crises.

Recommendations

What should government and policymakers do after an attack?

Communicate government actions transparently.

When the government does not have a united and clear voice for the policies they implement, there is opportunity for misinformation and conjecture. The government should deliver public service announcements regarding the events that have transpired and the plan of action they are going to undertake. As evidenced from our interviews, many citizens only found out about the social media ban as it happened.

Strategically counter terrorist propaganda and disinformation.

Alastair Reed and Haroro J. Ingram suggest that instead of shutting down social media platforms after a terrorist attack, governments should use such platforms to communicate accurate updates to the public and to reassure them, as well as to compete with propagandists and extremists over how the public generates meaning from such incidents.⁵² The widespread use of VPNs in Sri Lanka and the resultant patchwork nature of the social media shutdown reveals that citizens still use social media to gather information and interpret events despite a ban. The government should redirect its efforts towards providing strategic counter-messaging on social media rather than trying to shut it down.

What should government and policymakers do to proactively prevent misinformation?

Mandate greater accountability from companies who create these platforms.

Part of the issue seems to be that social media companies are having a difficult time navigating content that is being posted in different countries, with different languages and cultural nuances. Extremist and polarising content is not always so obvious, and what is extremist in one context may not be seen as extremist in another. These companies, as they are already doing, need to expand their workforce in countries that have a history of producing misinformation resulting in violence. Facebook has recently established a form of rapid response unit, which is capable of quickly mobilising in the middle of a new crisis to take down and contain harmful content that incites violence. The Sri Lankan government should encourage such efforts.

Develop a clear, comprehensive communication plan for emergencies.

In advance of an attack or riots, producing clear messaging around the spread of misinformation and disinformation online, as well as messaging against the communalisation of emergencies, would put Sri Lanka in a better position to stay ahead of such events spiralling out of control, on social media and on the ground.

Raise awareness of misinformation and improve public digital hygiene.

It is important that Sri Lanka sets up communication channels that would regularly address the public and expose false information. Government and policymakers should also support civil society and other groups that educate the public on misinformation and disinformation and establish best practices to perform their own verification checks. Post-incident misinformation and disinformation does not spread in a void, but rather, in a media culture without strong media ethics, freedom of the press, and fact verification.

48 Interview with journalist in Colombo (requested anonymity), December 19, 2019.

49 For more, see: Emily Stewart, “Can Facebook be trusted to combat misinformation? Sri Lanka’s shutdown suggests no.” Vox, April 23, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/4/23/18511640/facebook-sri-lanka-bombing-social-media-attack>

50 Interview with journalist (requested anonymity), December 11, 2019.

51 Amarnath Amarasingam and Daniel Bass, eds. Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War. (London: Hurst & Co., 2016).

52 Alastair Reed and Haroro J. Ingram, “Towards a Framework for Post-Terrorist Incident Communications Strategies,” Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology: Paper No.12. 2019. https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190809_grntt_paper_12_0.pdf

What can journalists, activists and media agencies do to combat misinformation?

Increase fact-checking culture amongst journalists and the public.

Credible media and journalists are also instrumental in fighting disinformation or misinformation. A proactive approach to flagging and addressing fake news is paramount. Building the capacity of journalists and social media influencers to know when misinformation is being spread and giving them the tools to push back in real time, is fundamentally important in a country like Sri Lanka, where localised events can quickly spiral out of control.

Improve internet hygiene through increasing awareness and media literacy.

Journalists, activists and media agencies should also play a part in alerting the general public to the existence and danger of fake news and help equip them with the skills to take in information critically.

Prevent political interference.

Cultivating journalistic integrity and professionalism fosters unbiased and nonpartisan content. This will create a much less polarised landscape for the media and allow the general public to trust information without needing to consider the possibility of a political hand at play. When citizens begin to feel like the press in the country is independent and objective, trust in these institutions will also increase.

As all of our respondents made clear, Sri Lanka needs a well-thought out emergency response plan for attacks, riots, and communal violence. In a country where such violence is sadly commonplace, it does not make sense to respond to every episode of violence as if it is unprecedented. Having a strategy in place will ensure that a country like Sri Lanka, slowly emerging from a decades-long protracted civil war with many wounds that remain unhealed, is able to respond to ongoing crises in ways that protect human rights, the rule of law, and communal harmony.

Concluding Remarks

A week after the Easter attacks, the country once again descended into violence. Mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were burned to the ground and civilians were attacked in the streets. Even in other minority communities, the anti-Muslim animus was felt. In the Northern Province, some Tamils stopped sending their children to school because their teacher was a Muslim. Teachers who had taught their children for years were suddenly seen as suspicious sleeper agents. In these tough moments, the government could have stepped in and used the attack as an important teachable moment for the country, kept extremist Buddhist groups and their rhetoric in check, and tried to ensure that violence did not result. Instead, it largely responded with silence.

The decision to block social media was, according to most of our respondents, only a temporary fix to a larger social problem. Most people, including actors spreading misinformation and disinformation, found ways to circumvent the ban quite quickly, and it seems to have had little impact on the number of posts that were circulating in general. It is clear that if Sri Lanka wants to manage and prevent future violence, the country needs to weigh the social, technical, and economic impacts of protracted digital blockades as a blanket policy response.

List of Interviews

Interview with activist in Colombo (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

Interview with activist in Kandy (requested anonymity), November 8, 2019.

Interview with international diplomat (requested anonymity), December 12, 2019

Interview with journalist (requested anonymity), December 11, 2019.

Interview with journalist (requested anonymity), December 12, 2019.

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About the Authors

Amarnath Amarsingham

Amarnath Amarasingam is an Assistant Professor in the School of Religion at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, and an Associate Fellow at the Global Network on Extremism and Technology. His research interests are in radicalization, terrorism, diaspora politics, post-war reconstruction, and the sociology of religion. He is the author of *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Sri Lankan Tamil Activism in Canada* (2015), and the co-editor of *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War* (2016). He has also written several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, has presented papers at over 100 national and international conferences, and has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, Politico, *The Atlantic*, and *Foreign Affairs*.

Rukshana Rizwie

Rukshana Rizwie is a journalist and editor based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is presently the News Editor at the *Daily News*, which is Sri Lanka's national daily newspaper. She has over 16 years of experience as a journalist and international correspondent covering the war against the Taliban while in Saudi Arabia and the War against the LTTE in Sri Lanka. She holds a postgraduate in International Relations. Her most recent work appears in a book published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime "Faces of Assassination" which was launched recently.

