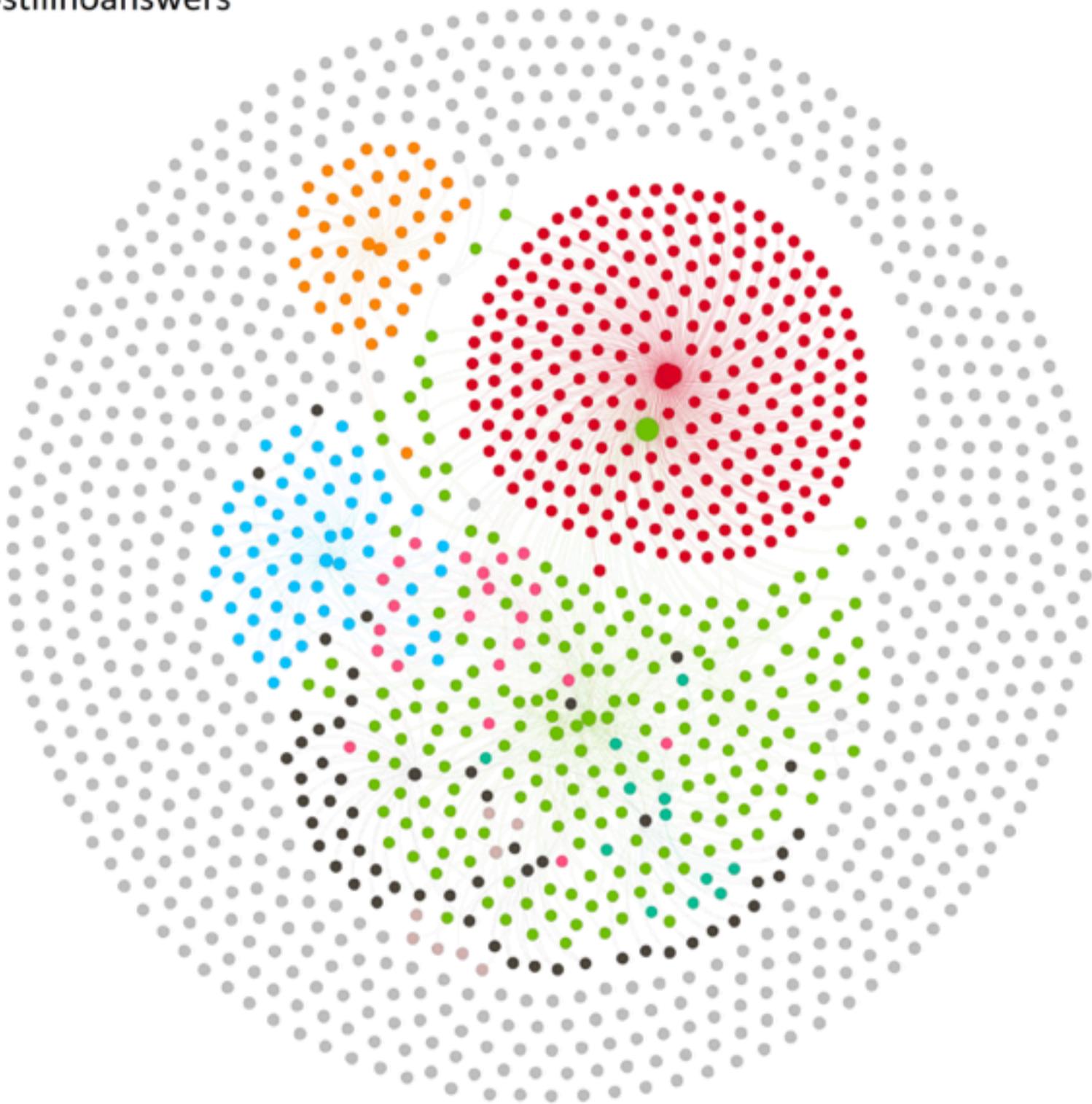


Sanjana Hattotuwa

# Digital Blooms

#stillnoanswers



## Witnessing a constitutional crisis through social media

Of the many frames of reference readers may employ to help comprehend the extraordinary developments in Sri Lanka after the 26th of October, I doubt images of flowers in bloom or flower beds would immediately spring to mind. And yet, this is how I see Sri Lanka, or more precisely, how I study the debates, conversations, events and processes that shape our polity and society today. My doctoral research is anchored to the study of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, post-war. There is an entire canon of academic research and literature around the use and abuse of social media around revolutions. Little to nothing is published around the role, reach and relevance of Facebook and Twitter in societies coming out of war. I inhabit the intersection of what's called data science - the study of very large datasets - politics and peacebuilding. My chief interest is in creating social media ecosystems - think of it like immunisation - resilient to content and actors who incite hate and violence.

Having set up [groundviews.org](http://groundviews.org) in 2006, the country's first civic media platform that continues to publish content that cannot or will not go up in mainstream media, my research at present is anchored to the dynamics of social media beyond inflammatory and simplistic headlines. I look at Facebook and Twitter at scale - meaning, in the hundreds of thousands of posts - sifting through content in English and Sinhala for patterns and trends that can help explain complex interactions between what is produced, shared and engaged with online, and what this content goes on to inspire in the real world. A causal linkage between online hate and kinetic violence is elusive and not the goal of my research. I am more interested in how Sri Lanka's 18-34 demographic are introduced to politics, and subsequently, engage with political developments on social media.

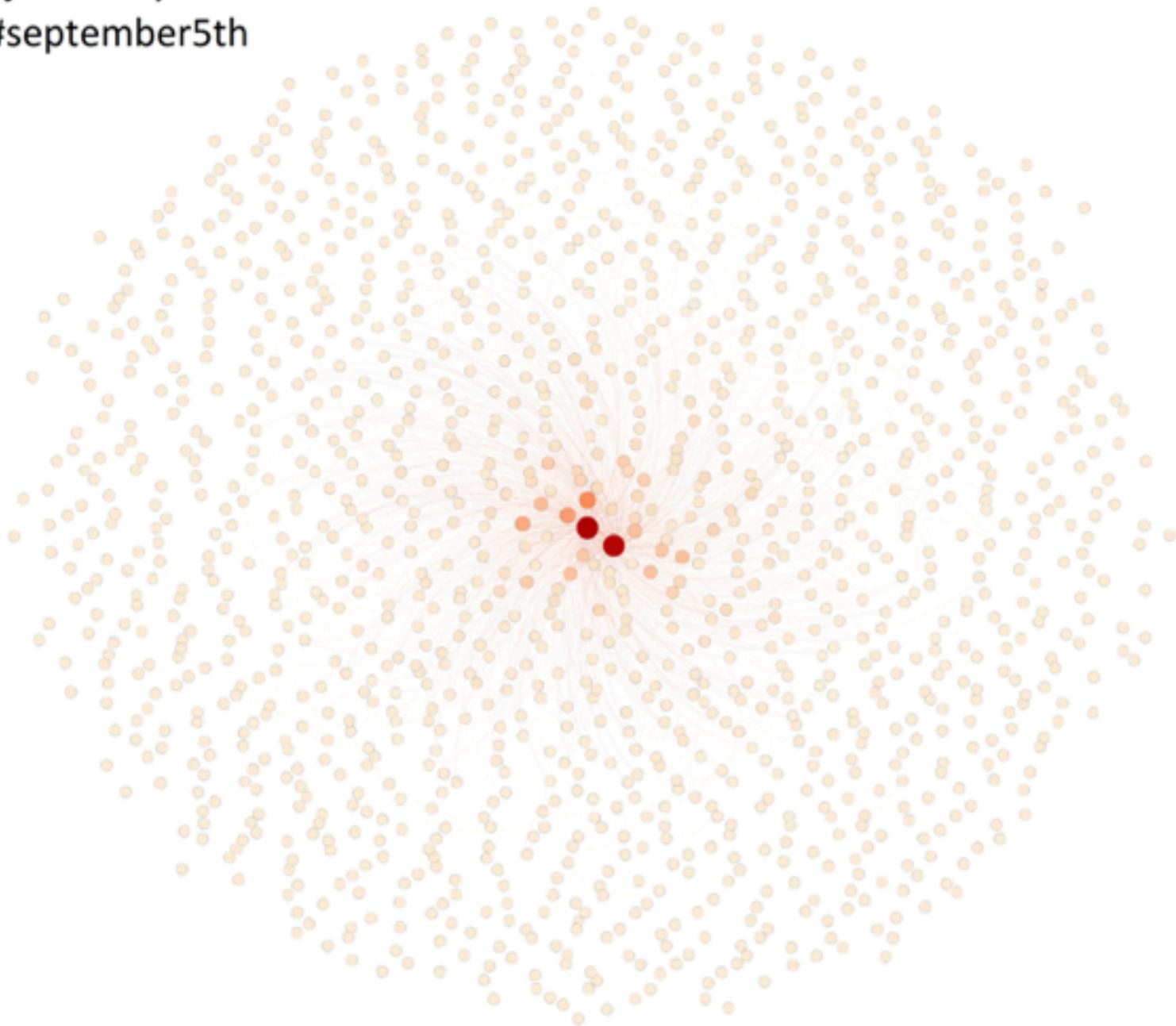
The research is hard. A large part of it is visualising upwards of hundreds of thousands of records in ways that can help flesh out conversational dynamics. Facebook and Twitter have different affordances - meaning that you can do things on one you cannot on the other. The most obvious difference is with the length of a post - Twitter allows a far more limited number of characters than Facebook. Looking at how conversations grow, spread and eventually die offers insights into what exactly generates the most traction on social media, and why. Over time, armed with contextual knowledge, the data can also help prefigure a proclivity towards certain responses.

The mushroom around Jana Balaya, the political protest engineered by Namal Rajapaksa

#ජනබලයකොළඹට

#janabalaya

#september5th



in early September captures three key hashtags on Twitter used by the organisers. Even without knowing anything about data science, the singular way the graph is structured - like a hub and spoke, with a few key accounts at the centre everyone else links to - is evident. Compare this to the mushroom that captures, around the same time, a campaign by Amnesty International South Asia around enforced disappearances. Using the hashtag the organisers used, the graph very clearly shows several clusters within a larger one. Not unlike a matryoshka doll, each cluster is its own ecosystem, within the larger campaign. The two campaigns are visually distinct. Both visualisations are created using thousands of tweets, computationally arranged in such a way that groups them according to ties to other accounts. This gives researchers the ability to figure out who in the larger network

really drives the discussion as well as other influential actors who acts as bridges or amplifiers. All this is useless without contextual knowledge, which is why my research is anchored to socio-political dynamics at home, which I know far more than a foreign country.

Since the 26th of October, several key dynamics and trends have emerged, strengthening what I have observed for months. Gossip in Sinhala on Facebook is the primary driver of news and information, including political frames. This is extremely disturbing on many levels, since these pages - which numbers in the hundreds - produce content as such great volume and velocity, they are by order of magnitude engaged with more than mainstream news sites in any language. Ethics are absent and professional optional on these page. Those who engage believe they are very well-informed, when in fact they are entirely ill or misinformed. On the other hand, memes - or cartoons produced anonymously - are hugely popular as a vehicle for incisive political critique. Often, the assumption is that exposure to this content makes consumers better informed. Sadly, this too is not the case.

Think of followers or fans as different species of flowers, growing side by side. What may look visually quite appealing is in fact a significant, growing problem. Each bloom is distinct and doesn't interact with others. Likewise, on social media, fans of a politician, party or brand rarely if ever engage with anything that contests their beliefs. Worse, they are hostile towards difference. These are called echo chambers, which are hyper-partisan and rife for the injection of rumour engineered to instigate violence.

Responding to these complex, violent dynamics is made harder by the fact that dissent, advocacy and activism, in a context of authoritarian control of all other media, is also to be found on social media. Vital speeches made at the Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero's memorial event were censored by mainstream media and only carried over social media. Compelling letters, statements, press releases and short essays opposing the unconstitutional coup are rife on social media, just as much as content seeking to legitimise, justify and normalise it are also strategically produced and promoted.

This is Sri Lanka's new battleground. Its dynamics are complex and evolving, but the simple fact is this - every single political party, politician and other actors vying for political power, recognise the value of capturing attention, containing negative messaging and controlling the narrative on social media. My research, like a medical doctor would, examines all this as a contagion. The worst we can be, and amongst us, often overwhelm our better angels on social media. The odds are stacked against those of us who seek to strengthen civil discourse, decency, dignity and democracy online. I work to increase

those odds and believe the democratic potential of Sri Lanka is anchored to getting this right.