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# DIGITAL BLOOMS

**Sanjana Hattotuwa** witnesses a constitutional crisis through social media

Of the many frames of reference readers may employ to help comprehend the extraordinary developments in Sri Lanka since 26 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.

**DATA SCIENCE** My doctoral research is anchored to the study of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter postwar. There is an entire canon of academic research and literature covering 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 peace building.

My chief interest is in creating social media ecosystems (think of it like immunisation) that are resilient to content and actors who incite hate and violence.

Having set up 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.

**FB AND TWITTER** 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'm more interested in how Sri Lanka's 18-34 demographic is introduced to politics and subse-



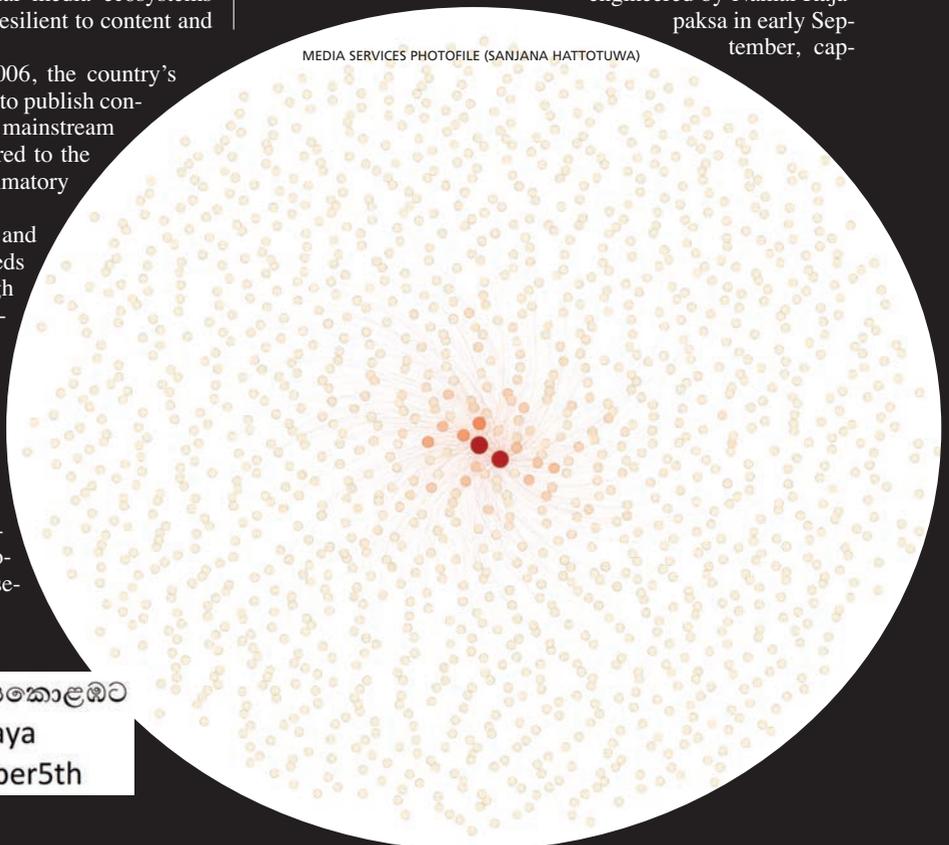
quently engage with political developments on social media.

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 because Twitter allows a far more limited number of characters than Facebook.

Looking at how conversations grow, spread and eventually die offers insights into what 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 in early September, cap-

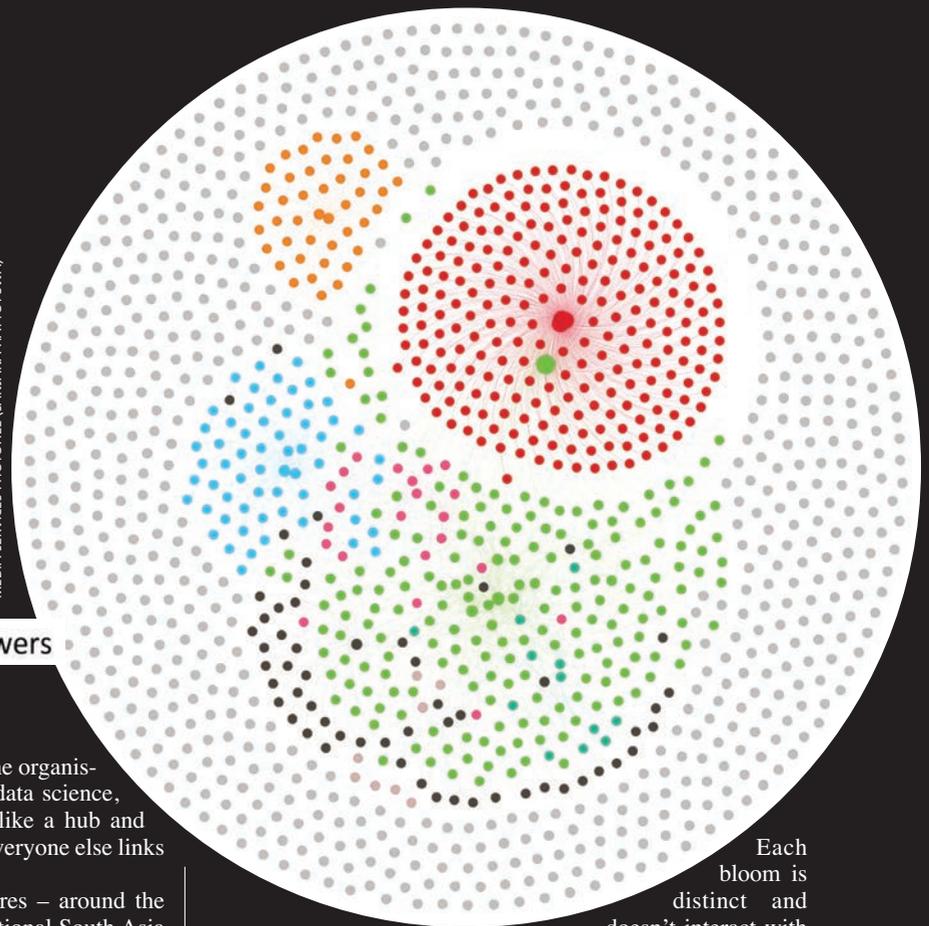
MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (SANJANA HATTOTUWA)



#ජනබලයකොළඹට  
#janabalaya  
#september5th

MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (GANJANA HATTOTUWA)

#stillnoanswers



tures 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 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 that are 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 act as bridges or amplifiers.

All this is useless without contextual knowledge, which is why my research is anchored to sociopolitical dynamics at home, which I know far more than a foreign country.

**DISTURBING GOSSIP** Since 26 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 number in the hundreds) produce content at such great volume and velocity, they're by order of magnitude engaged with more than mainstream news sites in any language.

**MISINFORMATION** Ethics are absent and professionalism is optional on these pages. Those who engage believe they're 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.

**ECO CHAMBERS** 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're hostile towards difference. These are called echo chambers – they're hyper partisan and rife for the injection of rumour engineered to instigate violence.

Responding to these complex and 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 Venerable 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.

**NEW BATTLEGROUND** 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 actor vying for political power recognises 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 overwhelms 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.

The writer is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA). He is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Otago in New Zealand.