COUNTERING HATE SPEECH

TOWARDS SAFE DIGITAL SPACES

Summaries and Resources -
Webinar Series June 2021

INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES

ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG
SOUTH ASIA

Countering Hate Speech:
Towards Safe Digital Spaces

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Webinar Series
June 2021

Countering Hate Speech: Towards Safe Digital Spaces

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Introduction

The International Centre for Ethnic Studies presented the webinar series titled 'Countering Hate Speech: Towards Safe Digital Spaces' in the month of June 2021.

Over five sessions, speakers and participants explored the breadth of how hate speech manifests itself, spreads, and is weaponised in societies.

The series began with a session that focused on the wider social fabric and the entrenched discrimination in institutions and policies that sets the background for hate speech in these contexts.

This was followed by an analysis of how media in all forms – traditional and alternative – acts to both promote hate speech, as well as serve as an avenue by which positive counter-messaging can be used.

The third session took the form of a guided virtual tour through landmarks in art and architectural history in Sri Lanka, exploring how the cultures of communities have overlapped and co-existed, a reality that refutes the exclusionary claims made by those who engage in ethno-nationalist hate speech today.

The final two sessions provided participants with hands-on virtual and critical thinking tools to navigate the media spaces that they encounter daily – from a variety of digital tools to verify information and visuals to questions that people should ask of themselves when using online spaces – as well as ideas to promote counter-speech and positive messaging.

This booklet combines the key elements addressed by the speakers across each of the sessions. It also presents external resources authored by the speakers previously that might be of interest to attendees of the series, or readers of this publication.

Session 1:

Stories from Across the Globe

'Hate speech' is often considered a phenomenon that simply occurs because people use the internet more. However, it occurs within and as a result of a wider social and political milieu and is merely an extension of existing fault lines. This session addressed this wider picture of marginalization and extremism in diverse societies, illustrating how hate speech manifests itself in these contexts. Speakers also shared lessons learned from attempts to restrict hate speech by law, and from countries who have moved towards reconciliation.

Dr. James Gomez

The Regional director of the Asia Centre in Thailand, a social enterprise that works to conduct dialogue in and among countries in the South-East Asian region and influence policy for the betterment of communities

- Some of the most prevalent forms of hate speech in South-East Asia are remarks directed at migrant workers and refugees, people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, and people with different political ideologies. It is important that those looking to counter hate speech are aware that it goes beyond race and religion to these factors as well.

- In the region, legislative measure to combat hate speech often revolve around criminalizing speech acts that threaten speech and security.

- A perfect example of this is the 'harmony laws' enacted by countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines or Myanmar. They are an illustration of the divisive nature of solutions, because these laws are divisive, by setting a 'special status' for a particular community based on ethnicity or religion. In addition, policies are also based on race, leading to:
  - Marginalization of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar
  - Discrimination of undocumented workers in Indonesia
  - Arrest of dissident bloggers in Vietnam
  - Violence against transwomen in Malaysia

- To really combat the polarization of society, laws and policies that carry ethnic identity markers must be done away with.

- Dr. Gomez also reflected that countries that were colonized are among those that heavily employ race-based policies, in a continuation of colonial legacy. The British approach to the indigenous populations they were met with, was to compartmentalize groups – firstly through physical segregation and then my classification. This was also reflected in their Asian labour force. The policies were continued even after colonization as they benefited the majority, contributing to the racialization that remains in societies today.

- The political mobilization of hate speech in electoral campaigns need also to be considered. This occurs most often when hate speech is weaponized against a vulnerable community to gain conservative support for a particular candidate.

- Exploring solutions to hate speech, Dr. Gomez noted that when considering the redress for hate speech in law, most cases to gain legal redress for hate speech are filed for political advantage by the majority. In addition, when resorting to non-legal measures such as adjudication, one must consider how outcomes might be skewed when the majority is in power. The role of independent civil society and its advocacy capacity are critical here.

- He noted how social media has diluted the state's capture of mainstream media and the social narrative. Solutions to hate speech from the perspective of those in power would be new laws that address disinformation, and even tighter control of the social media infrastructure. Those not in power, such as citizens and those who would be targets for these laws, hope for the establishment of independent institutions to mitigate grievances for disadvantaged communities.

- It is essential to note the reality of how people are responding to hate speech and discrimination, as well as these attempts to control their expression. Those who are able to are seen to be leaving their jurisdiction, and whether where they move to actually provides them with a better environment is unsure. More worryingly, minorities accept their situation within a country, and allow themselves to become part of the majoritarian narrative.

Gehan Gunatilleke

A lawyer from Sri Lanka with a focus on international human rights and public law, who has written extensively on the shortfalls of legal controls to hate speech

- A key issue in responding or finding solutions to hate speech is that there is no fixed definition of the terms. Over the years, there have been several definitions and components of hate speech:
  - The conveyance of hatred. However, in many cases, it is not always expressed as outright hatred but can be presented as a symbol or an expression.
  - The element of irrationality – where the group is reduced to a stereotype – and it is not a rational hatred for someone who has done you wrong or committed an atrocity.
  - Hate speech targets ideologies over individuals, towards for example a belief system as opposed to those who hold those beliefs. Those who hold the ideology might be offended but it might not be considered hate speech.
  - Speech that does not fall within these factors but can create the groundwork for hate speech can be termed chauvinistic speech, where instead of outright expressing hatred towards another group, one trumps up the supremacy of your own group.

- The hate speech we currently see in Sri Lanka could be the end result of the expectation of post-war economic dividends in the south that didn't materialize, which gave legitimacy to the sudden scapegoating of Muslims. However, the economic realm cannot be the sole root of this rhetoric, when Sri Lankan origin stories, culture, and myths are so dominant with Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy. These allow for the proliferation of myths of entitlement and subsequent existential fears where the majority feels itself to be victimized.

- He stresses therefore that solutions must be structural – merely stopping the speech is just a 'band-aid' on the issue, when the actual causes of hatred remain unaddressed. Hate speech will remain an issue when, for example, the internet that allows its rapid proliferation is replaced by some other tool in the future.

- There should not be a conflict between hate speech and freedom of expression. When considering if controls would impinge on freedom, it is important to note that a person's freedom is bound by the rights others have. Restricting hate speech must not restrict free speech, because hate speech exists outside the domain of free speech.

- The lines here however, must be drawn clearly, and the issue arises with actors that draw these lines in bad faith. People must be able to trust the entity who draws that line, and if this entity is the state, Gunatilleke advises erring on the side of caution to protect free speech. If there is good reason to think the state won't be using laws against hate speech in good faith, citizens should push for non-legal remedies to deal with the issue because of the risk of excess. It is more crucial to preserve free speech than to arm the state that acts in bad faith.

- The internet is a space beyond traditional state structures and the state has an incentive to control it. Hate speech regulation through law is a disguised form of control of that space, and we must be concerned about the push to regulate the internet.

- In Sri Lanka, we see a paradox:
  - Clear inaction to deal with incitement to violence, where laws are not used. Therefore, it is not linked to one government but an institutional problem of the State that occurs when perpetrators are from the majority group.
  - At the same time, there is an excessive policing where hate speech is broadened to include statements that might be offensive or critical of the state. Recent cases of arrests of lawyers and poets show how the ICCPR is used as an instrument of terror when these dynamics are at play. In this context, institutions begin to decay and can't be trusted. Majoritarian trends have reversed attempts to make independent institutions and invite suspicion into how independently they can function, in the Sri Lankan context.

- There is a need to fill media space with the positive stories, where the tendency is to amplify negative ones. These stories can have the capacity to encourage people to replicate such positivity.

- The fact that education is more segregated than it was 30 years ago is also a concern, and desegregated education could help address polarisation. It must begin from a young age, where children interact with people from all communities, as the socialization might be harder to reverse it later life.

Saijai Liangpunsakul

A researcher who has experience working in Thailand and Myanmar, with a strong focus on digital rights and the responsible use of technology

- Definitions of the terms 'hate speech' is an issue, and in addition to that the interpretation of the word in local languages also remains a challenge. For example, in Thailand the word hate speech itself was translated to Thai 7 years ago. At the time, no one knew what the new word meant, just that it referred to a violation of the law, along the lines of defamation. Since then, hate speech laws in Thailand have been used primarily to silence critics of the royal family.

- Her research experience in Myanmar is extensive, and from her time engaged in monitoring and analysis of social media usage, she stresses that the prevalence of hate speech should not be traced simply to individuals being hateful online, but instead approached as a systematic issue carried out by bad actors.

- The hate speech on social media is a reflection of what's happening in society and the conflict that exist in a moment of time. Technological advancement in the form of social media served to worsen an existing conflict simply by making it more visible.

- In the events of pro-democracy protests in Thailand and Myanmar, she notes there is a presence of hate speech on both sides of the ideological divide. Moreover, comments that are close to hate speech, though not explicitly harmful, often go viral.

- The social media conversations that exist for discussion – and by extension, in the proliferation of hate speech – come from a lack of political space for young people to vent their anger against ruling forces. Social media

gives everyone an avenue to share their views and gain attention as they navigate a desperate social and economic situation.

- In exploring solutions, she envisions what would be the opposite or positive situation without hate speech. This is not so much a world without hate speech, but a better version of this world where people have technology to express themselves. Fifty years ago, we could not have imagined this world where citizens can use technology to share their ideas, so it is important that it is not curtailed.

- Regulation of hate speech alone will not work, as it will be used by bad actors to destroy other parties who politically oppose them.

- Social media companies also need to work on improving their products. Almost all decisions around the key platforms are made in Silicon Valley and then used to govern what we use around the world. A step forward would be to ensure that policy on such technology is inclusive, and does not come from just one small group.

- She stressed that combatting hate speech goes beyond targeting individuals for being hateful on social media. Most hate speech is systematic, and there are times when entire entities like the army can have a role in its proliferation. Addressing it in a meaningful way would mean all bad actors are held accountable for their actions.

Session 2:

The Power of Language

In the current age of attention and information, the lines between offline and online spheres are blurred, as are the lines between mainstream and digital media. The participants addressed the roles of mainstream and digital media in creating and disseminating hate speech, and provided insights into how users can use these same spaces in creative ways to building counter-narratives to these polarized ones.

Deepanjalie Abeywardena

Head of Media Research at Verite Research, overseeing the work of 'Ethics Eye' a watchdog that monitors and highlights unethical practices in mainstream media publications, across three languages

- Accuracy in reporting is a key media ethic and the availability of inaccurate information can lead to hate speech. For examples;
  - The anti-Muslim violence in Ampara that took place due to false news about the presence of sterilization pills in the food of a Muslim-run hotel
  - The campaign against Dr. Shafi, which began with news alleging the doctor had forcibly sterilized Sinhala women, claims which investigations could not corroborate and which were later proven to have been fabricated.

- A consistent pattern that Ethics Eye has noted is the tendency of mainstream media players to indicate the ethnicity of a wrongdoer only if they belong to a minority community, contributing to stereotyping these communities as criminal and therefore deserving of violent speech. Rarely, if ever, would one hear of a 'Sinhala drug smuggler', whereas when Tamils or Muslims are arrested for such crimes their ethnicity is specifically mentioned.

- The Easter Sunday attack was seen to grant legitimacy to media and wider society to be racist to Muslims. The reporting and commentary that followed the bombing of churches and hotels in 2019 by Islamist fundamentalists, was a promotion of existing prejudices towards the community. Again, the case of Dr. Shafi – published in a Sinhala newspaper with no substantial evidence – presents an intersection of several of these prejudices.

- Hate speech that occurs online cannot be separated from the offline impact that it can have, on lives and economies, as well as on the relationships between people. Social enmity is created and maintained; polarizing narratives result in a polarized society.

- Abeywardena responded to the question of the impact of ownership on the publication of hate speech or disinformation, and illustrated that her research indicated that there are media houses that both do and do not represent the views of the owner. In some cases, different publications in the same media house are different in their approach to portraying and reporting on minority communities. Responsibility for what is published lies with the editor, and public scrutiny should be directed as such when, for example, the publication claims Muslims are responsible for COVID.

- Social media is one of the main vehicles of information in Sri Lanka, and is widely consumed. It can be observed to shape the public mindset and therefore reflects the present moment of the society we live in to a significant extent.

- For this reason, she believes responsibility can't be deflected away from people's behaviour on these platforms to political parties as sole agents of creating hate and division. Unlike the dynamics of mainstream media, on social media it is difficult to identify one group as the cultivators of this type of discourse.

- The hatred that persists in society is linked largely to deeply-rooted issues and entrenched insecurities. Therefore, it is easily used and weaponized to achieve various ends, perpetuating the existence of the hatred once again in a vicious cycle.

- In an era flooded with negativity, Abeywardena believes it is essential to promote ethical reporting. Looking closely at problematic reporting and ensuring that it does not continue, she feels, is a way of building compassion.

Mahishaa Balraj

The co-founder of youth advocacy group Hashtag Generation, she has carried out research and monitoring that dive deep into patterns of social media use and behaviour, and how narratives are weaponized during elections

- Social media platforms have democratised how we create and consume information, giving citizens a role in disseminating and shaping the information landscape in a space that mirrors mainstream media. However, this power also means that rumours tend to be amplified amidst genuine news.

- The dynamic between offline and online spaces is a cycle, Balraj explains, where one sphere can lead to consequences in the other, as information flows freely. Hateful narratives, according to her team's observations, run in cycles of up to 2 to 3 weeks before dying down to give way to the next 'big' topic.

- Hate speech with an ethnoreligious angle that targets Muslims defies these short-lived cycles. In Sri Lanka, it receives traction throughout the year for long periods of time, owing to the steady stream of prejudices and rumours that are levelled against the community. Within the last year alone, Muslims were called 'bio-terrorists and 'super spreaders'. With regard to the issue of forced cremations of people who died of Covid-19, allegations were made that Muslims demanded special treatment and couldn't make sacrifices for their country's safety.

- She clarifies that while hate speech exists towards other marginalized communities – women, Tamil people – in terms of numbers, Muslims are targeted the most.

- Balraj illustrated the relationship between mainstream media and digital media, noting that while the methods might differ, drivers and consequences of these narratives are the same. Popular mainstream media sites have also grown their social media presence in recent years and are consistently among the top ranked websites. This demonstrates the extent to which a single player can control narratives. Mainstream media may be the point of origin for some narratives, but they can take on another form

once these stories are brought into the digital sphere. The two spaces do not function independently.

- The algorithms that social media platforms run ensure that an individual can keep seeing content around their preferences or biases, resulting in people being isolated from the multiple narratives that surround a community or issue. In this way, social media can sometimes take away autonomy from an individual in making decisions during elections, which by extension is eroding the fabric of society.

- Social media companies such as Facebook thrive on this type of engagement, boastinf about bringing the world closer, whereas they are the ones who mostly reap the benefits of these increased connections. When there is backlash against companies on these platforms, the algorithm further creates profits for them. It is essential therefore that technology companies begin looking at alternative algorithms that aren't hinged on toxicity.

- In the last year, positive content such as the stories of Sirasa Lakshapathi winner Shukra Munawwar and cricketer Vijayakanth Viyaskanth of the Jaffna Stallions drew support for different communities from all communities.

- Negative content is shared faster on these platforms, as a basic instinct in human psychology. Because of how well this type of content works, significant amounts of money are thrown into weaponizing it.

- Advocates and citizens need to restrategise therefore, when they take to running campaigns countering these specific narratives of hate, acknowledging the technological and financial power behind how these are sustained.

Ishara Danasekara

The former co-editor of Vikalpa civic media platform and an independent reporter, she has produced visual stories on human rights issues in Sinhala, publishing and receiving backlash in digital media spaces

- Sensitive and complex human stories about issues in Sri Lanka are lacking in the Sinhala language, and especially in the mainstream media.

- Access to digital platforms has also steadily risen in Sri Lanka – on these low-risk, low-cost and high-impact online spaces, citizens are raising issues and setting agendas.

- The dynamic of social media is that it lets people engage with the content and provide instant feedback, even challenging the author, as for the most part there are no limits on the medium. Mainstream media does not afford this feature of quick questioning, nor does it allow citizens to instantly hold government or leadership figures accountable. Where earlier the most one could do was scold the writer while reading the newspaper in their living room, now people have quicker access to critique – and by extension, attack – those who produce this news.

- Working in these spaces in Sinhala, Danasekara has also received significant threats and backlash especially when she reports on issue faced by minority communities. The responses are gendered, exhibiting misogyny as well as racism on the part of the commentors. Aside from being called a 'threat to Sinhala nationality', derogatory sexist language also forms a large portion of this backlash.

- She says, however, that these reactions mostly come from people who have not actually read the articles and are instant reactions to the headline or premise in the social media post that introduces it. In other cases, they are people who have misunderstood the reports or whose existing biases guide them to misinterpret the stories that she and other journalists tell about the issues faced by minority communities. Hate-mongering against these communities

- There is responsibility that social media companies must take, seeing how their platforms have been used as vectors for this hate. These entities need to improve their reporting mechanisms for Sinhala language, to address the proliferation of hate speech in Sri Lanka.

- With regard to the wave of anti-Muslim speech and violence in the last few years, Danasekara says that she feels people are not necessarily increasingly becoming hateful but this hate is more visible to the public as

they have access to express themselves, while at the same time there are no sufficient tools to address hate.

- The idea that we are merely seeing the hatred in society more is a concern for the long term. As much as social media companies must take responsibility and action to address the issue, it remains a deeper social issue that needs to be addressed offline.
  - In doing so, she notes the focus should not be on social media alone. A broad-based response would include a focus on rights and issues minority communities face. Hate speech should not be an issue only when violence bleeds into offline spaces, but should be considered for the impact it has within the digital space alone, as it is this impact that eventually informs offline actions.

- Social media has emerged as a platform where people can express their feelings, and has been widely beneficial too. In times of the pandemic or natural disasters, it has been used to carry out relief campaigns that have provided support and food to thousands of people.

- She uses the example of 'flower speech' campaign in Myanmar, used kindness to counter hate speech. Such campaigns that amplify good messages and advise people to stand against hateful messages have taken place in Sri Lanka but they are far from adequate as they have not sufficiently targeted Sinhala-speakers, or focused on the local languages.

Jamila Hussain

She is currently the Deputy News Editor at the Daily Mirror, and has decades of experience in journalism under her belt, having worked as a reporter during the conflict and all the key political developments that followed.

- Hate speech in media reporting has not become increasingly rampant in recent months, but has been this way for a long time.

- Journalists musts strive to report stories that are factual and balanced. She notes that when a mainstream media publication makes the claim that an individual is at fault, society tends to believe unquestioningly. Similarly,

mainstream media's portrayal of people deemed 'criminals' is difficult to shake once it has been consumed by society. In her role as an editor now, she makes an effort to ensure the publication runs comprehensive reporting supported by documentation.

- Husain notes that mainstream media is not the only cause for the proliferation of hate speech in society, and social media is far more powerful in its reach. She says reporters in mainstream publications are merely reporting facts, not their own judgements. The comments in response to these articles are also filled with hate speech, and these reactions or interpretations are beyond the journalist's control.

- Leading Sinhala media remains biased and on occasion can be seen publishing outright racism, which Husain herself has been subject to, for reporting on critical issues.

- Mainstream media remains the entity that takes the most of the blame from the public when reports are published.

- While she acknowledges the importance of freedom of speech and the human right of expression. Although freedom of speech and expression is an important human right, blocks on social media in some sense could stop further violence from spreading in the instance of a crisis. For example, within hours of the Easter Sunday attacks, when hate speech towards Muslims began to rise, the block on hate speech that was enforced served to control it to an extent. As someone subject to that hate and also worried to travel at that time, she found the block was helpful.

- Journalists are essentially middle men between institutions and the people, who are reporting facts. Husain feels it is up to the public to react responsibly to the stories. (She details that she has faced attacks for reporting facts, for simply publishing issues and shortfalls that are taking place within institutions.

- To ensure some measure of reliability and accountability, Husain and her team look to include several quotes – of which at least one is from a high-ranking official – in their news stories. However, in cases of breaking news that need to be quick, they are required to run stories without more than one source. They keep checking and verifying information throughout, and

release corrections or updates as the situation unfolds. In situations like this, most media outlets are racing to publish the same story, and there is some sense of being 'beaten' to publication if they wait too long for too many sources.

- She draws on examples where journalists have broken news haphazardly, only to find out shortly afterwards that it is either incomplete or false. When reporters are fixed on traffic and clicks, and sacrifice including a solid source in their material, this can happen.

- Husain notes that in this industry, negativity sells. On the occasions that journalists attempt to highlight positives, they do not get as much traction to form trends among the public in the way issues and controversies do.

Session 3:

Shared Histories and New Spaces

Hasini Haputhanthri is an ICES Research Fellow, arts manager and researcher at the intersections of social inclusion, history, and culture.

In this session, Haputhanthri took the audience through a more complex history than the one that has been mainstreamed in the Sri Lankan education system over the last few decades. She shared instances where the cultures and histories of individual communities overlap with one another to weave a tapestry more interconnected than the compartmentalized and exclusive stories many know.

> *Our current way of telling history imagines Sri Lanka as an island, that therefore our histories are separate from those of any other country. It is not possible to do that.*

Examples of this exist in art history, architecture and archaeology. A few of these are:

- The image of Ravana – a figurehead used in the construction of the extremist Sinhalese nationalist identity– has even been recorded in Cambodia
- The expansion of the Chola Empire across what is South and South East Asia brought cultural elements across all these countries – in effect, it has created shared historical elements in the region
- The use of the Westarian cross, a Catholic symbol, in ancient stupas of Anuradhapura – which is regarded as a Buddhist civilization
- The many Hindu elements of art and architecture found within structures of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms
- The descent of the Sinhala and Tamil languages from Brahmi script
- The Tamil Granta script eventually being used to form the Sinhala script

> *There are no boundaries to demarcate which history is 'yours' or 'mine'– we cannot enforce the identity categories we use in society today. This history is not entirely unknown, it just has not made it into mainstream works.*

Worldwide influences have shaped the history of the island, as a result of it welcoming many cultures and religions to its shores for trade, and not only as a result of colonization. For example, the island of 'Taprobane' features on a map that predates that drawn by Ptolemy. The island, in this image, is depicted bigger than the Indian subcontinent, as a reflection of its figurative importance in trade and sea routes.

While many writings assume Sri Lanka was simply a passive recipient of what was occurring around it, there are instances where it is seen having influenced and played a role in regional politics. The Nalanda Gedige was built by a king who was brought up in India but born in Sri Lanka, acted as a member of the Pallava court and fought with them in their dynastic clashes.

> *This is our legacy; a community that was open, negotiating and borrowing from other countries, inspired by and an inspiration for others.*

- As the use of a single site changes hands between rulers and communities, the story of a single site can change as well.
- The 'nai pena vihara' where Buddhist sites become Hindu sites
- The magul maduwa in the Dalada Maligawa, a Buddhist structure, served as one of the inspirations for the Trinity College Chapel in Kandy, a Christian place of worship, as well as for the Independence Square in Colombo
- Coastal temples and mosques that borrowed from Baroque architecture, with inspiration from Catholic cathedrals

> *These processes of borrowing, buying and negotiating were the formation of identity as a historical process. To then assume everything was harmonious is not a correct understanding; there was conflict, confluence and continuity.*

Complex histories

Haputhanthri's research works to illustrate that history, in Sri Lanka or anywhere, is not simplistic. However, these stories remain marginalized in order to accommodate a singular narrative. For example, multiple narratives

that form Sri Lankan history are often disregarded while mainstream education and narratives are based almost solely on the Mahavamsa.

> *We must start teaching a history that is inclusive, it could act as a better path in forming a more tolerant identity, and regulate the hate speech we are trying to deal with.*

The British colonisers employed homogenous identity markers for the purpose of categorizing. It helped them run a centralized system of administration, undertake a census, cartography and other ways of 'labelling'. In their sole goal of running an empire, they were looking for simple ways to understand the local population. For that reason, groups such as Tamil Buddhists were not present in their categories. These rigid ethnic boundaries were drawn, therefore, for their political gain.

> *The inclusive identity we need to create for the future cannot be imagined on a blank page, but rather with an understanding of history that serves our present more positively than one that discriminates, allowing us to determine identity for the future.*

Many people refer to a 'Sri Lankan identity'; Haputhanthri raises the question of what that would be defined as, and notes that one can't decouple a history of a country from how they define themselves now.

History is made as everyone is in the act of telling or re-telling history. This therefore makes it almost impossible to establish one truth. The obsession with authenticity hinders our understanding of history and requires us changing our own imagination of what history is, to more closely reflect the multiple truths and voices that make up history.

The writing of history is not an abstract exercise in an abstract space. It is the responsibility of the historian to assess the dynamics of the audience and moment of the present and assume the impact of the theory.

History and our actions now don't happen in a vacuum, but is rather a reflection of the current moment and dynamics between groups that are a result of the history up to this point.

Exclusive narratives

History is being rewritten in what can only be described as creative ways by Sinhala and Tamil nationalists both, each with the aim of spreading their own narrative. Myths are adapted and appropriated to serve each group's ideology.

Civil society, academia, and media are not skilled at presenting alternative narratives to those narratives that lead to discrimination and hatred.

Multicultural and hybrid spaces reflect the reality of life, and are clear indicators of the true historical process.

- Kataragama - for the diversity in religions that co-exist alongside each other

- Mannar, Bathalangunduwa, Panama – for the combination of ethnicity within individuals and families as a result of hybridity

> *History would help us not to re-establish but to challenge and dismantle these ideas, and question how inadequate moderate identity categories are. It pushes us all to realise that we belong to something bigger.*

The roots of hate speech

The fears and insecurity that breed hate speech is social, not necessarily historic and deep-rooted; however, one must question why these fears are triggered so easily into violence. That is due to a background of discrimination and exclusivist identities, which signals a way of looking at a particular group of people. In that environment, which has been constructed by history, they are easily triggered.

If the mindset of discrimination was not so strongly conditioned, people might not react and would ask questions about the claims being made to them about groups in society. This mindset has been built in the long term through socialization.

If the hate speech we see today wasn't happening in an environment that breeds hatred, where instead there had been a long history of projecting the positive, there would be models for people to relate to that differed from discrimination and violence.

Using education to tell better histories and counter hate speech

- An inclusive syllabus in school textbooks can be achieved by an inclusive group of experts, who will hopefully write in more inclusive histories. Diverse voices need to be present in the process, and not just the output.

- Teaching must not happen in silos, divided into subjects like art, art history, history and archaeology; dividing things causes us to lose the bigger picture, when we should be gaining a multidisciplinary understanding of the world.

- Language lessons are crucial as so much of hate speech is based on language. We should be able to identify the words we use to call each other, and what it means to call another person by these words.

Countering hate speech requires us to understand deep meanings, hierarchies and discrimination in our societies that are deeply embedded in the words we use. It also requires us to bring together the multiple narratives that make up our history. It might not be one that is complete, and that it is not how we should look at history. It would, however, help us see a better and more complete story.

Sessions 4 & 5:

Taking Action! Critical Thinking in The Digital Age

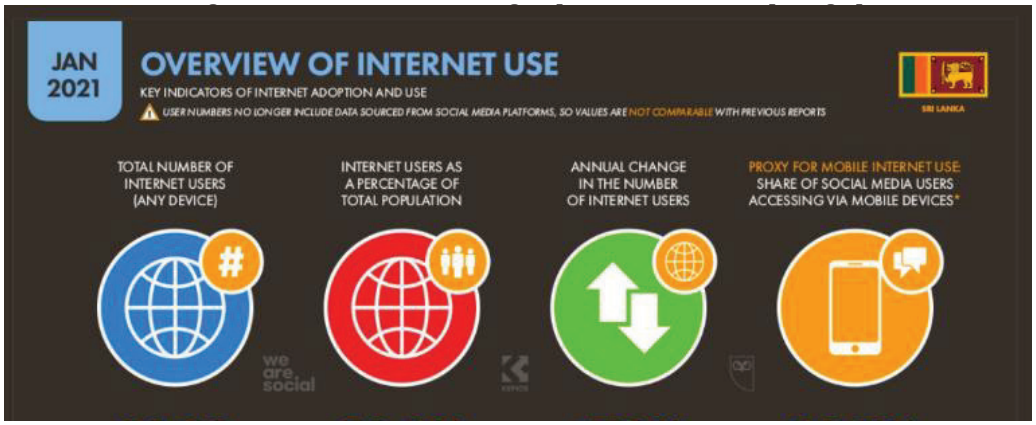
Hashtag Generation

A movement led and run by a group of young tech-savvy, socially conscious Sri Lankans advocating for the meaningful civic and political participation of youth, especially young women and young people from minority groups.

Nethmini Medawala – Director of Programmes
Senel Wanniarachchi – Director, co-founder
Darshatha Gamage – Head of Trainings and Resource Mobilisation

Internet landscape of Sri Lanka

The internet usage in Sri Lanka needs to be understood when critically thinking about social media. There are close to 10.9 million users on social media as of January 2021, which is almost half the country's population. Due to COVID-19, there are more users on the internet. The percentage of users on the internet using smart phones is 98.7%, showing a mass of users with immediate access to the network. Top websites By judging the traffic, top websites could be identified as Google, YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, gossip sites, news sites and pornographic sites.



JAN 2021

TOP WEBSITES BY TRAFFIC (ALEXA)

RANKING OF TOP WEBSITES BASED ON TOTAL TRAFFIC VOLUME IN DECEMBER 2020, ACCORDING TO ALEXA*

SRI LANKA

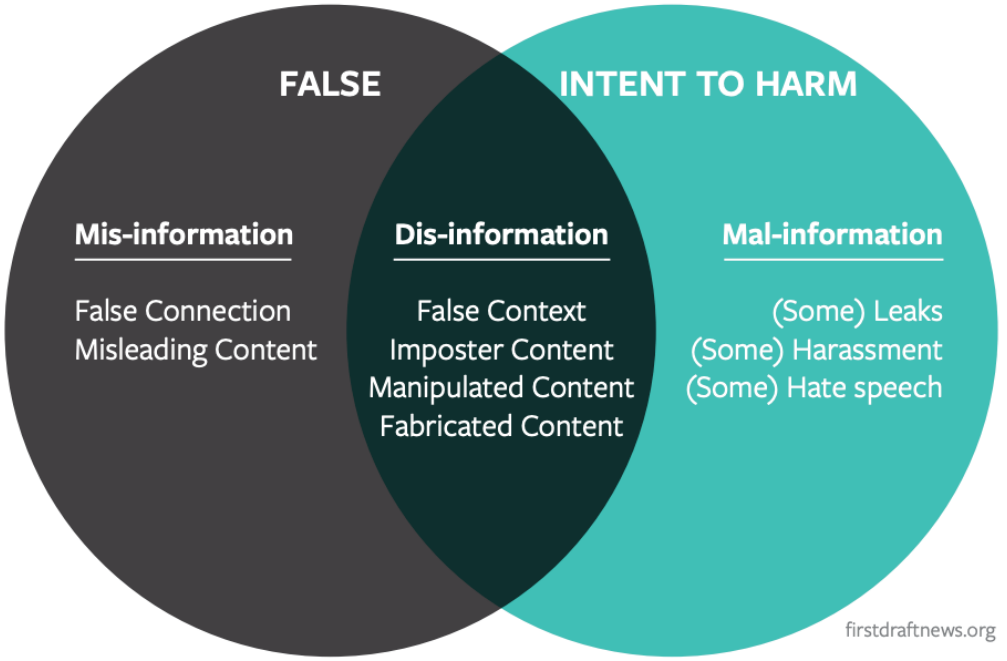
#	WEBSITE	TIME / DAY	PAGES / DAY
01	GOOGLE.COM	15M 41S	17.02
02	YOUTUBE.COM	17M 23S	9.86
03	GOOGLE.LK	6M 49S	8.71
04	FACEBOOK.COM	18M 47S	8.82
05	ZOOM.US	8M 14S	3.93
06	ALIEXPRESS.COM	10M 17S	8.73
07	IKMAN.LK	13M 18S	9.99
08	HIRUFM.LK	8M 38S	4.00
09	YAHOO.COM	5M 08S	4.74
10	EBAY.COM	10M 03S	7.94

#	WEBSITE	TIME / DAY	PAGES / DAY
11	WIKIPEDIA.ORG	3M 48S	3.10
12	DARAZ.LK	9M 46S	7.25
13	XHAMSTER.COM	12M 58S	9.59
14	HIRUNEWS.LK	8M 11S	4.27
15	GOSSIPLANKANEWS.COM	7M 16S	3.89
16	TAMILWIN.COM	5M 42S	3.30
17	MICROSOFT.COM	4M 29S	3.32
18	AMAZON.COM	10M 40S	9.94
19	ADADERANA.LK	5M 17S	3.37
20	SLT.LK	3M 23S	2.58

27 SOURCE: ALEXA (JAN 2021). *NOTES: 'ALEXA' IS THE NAME OF AMAZON'S INSIGHTS ARM, AND DATA SHOWN HERE ARE NOT RESTRICTED TO ACTIVITIES ON 'ALEXA' VOICE PLATFORMS. VALUES FOR "TIME / DAY" AND "PAGES / DAY" REPRESENT ALEXA'S ESTIMATES OF AVERAGES FOR GLOBAL VISITORS, NOT JUST LOCAL MARKET VISITORS. "TIME / DAY" VALUES REPORTED IN MINUTES AND SECONDS. ADVISORY: SOME WEBSITES FEATURED IN THIS RANKING MAY CONTAIN ADULT CONTENT. PLEASE USE CAUTION WHEN VISITING UNKNOWN WEBSITES.

we are social Hootsuite

What is fake news?



Fake news entails three sections:

1. Misinformation: These content do not have the intention of causing harm and are not trying to mislead anyone.
2. Malinformation: These have the intention to cause harm; some parts of the content can be true.
3. Disinformation: These are false information; they are knowingly created with the intention to cause harm.

Are the narratives you see on your social media controlled?

With the development of social media, there is an influx of information and theoretically this should make users better informed. However, most of the content you see on social media are the types that will reinforce what you already believe and think about. This is because the algorithms of the platforms are built in to track the content you observe and bring similar content in your direction.

Are most of the content we see on social media harmful?

Most of the content is not necessarily harmful, but the data show that harmful content performs better and reaches us better through the algorithms. This means we will be able to see more harmful content. This online reality will depend on the user and the type of content they usually browse through as well.

Gender and hate speech

The data around hate speech shows that women are the vast majority of the targets of hate speech and men are more involved in producing hate speech.

Coordinated inauthentic behaviour

Multiple accounts put out similar content at the same time. This is a strategy used to artificially manufacture and generate hate speech content. This tactic is used to target politicians or political parties during an election. It is the result of social media page owners talking to each other and coordinating this. Social media sites such as Facebook try to remove these types of posts from their platform.

What is our role with harmful content?

- Be mindful - do not respond

  The moment you engage with harmful content, the algorithms of the pages will identify the content as popular and the content will automatically perform better on the platform.

- Verify

  Sometimes just looking at the date the content was published can help. There are also other tools mentioned in the previous session that can be used.

- Report

  Each social media platform will have a set of community guidelines so it is important to report harmful content under the correct category mentioned.

- Critical analysis

  It is also important to think about the context of the harmful content. For example, what are the reasons behind this type of content being published?

Video resources: Fact-Checking Tools — Video 2: Looking up Claims and Website Owners

A few questions to think about:

- Is the claim true?

  If the website publishing the content looks suspicious, it will not have credibility. A simple tip is to copy a few sentences off the article and run a separate Google search to find out where else the same content can be found.

- Who owns the website?

  www.domainbigdata.com is a useful site that can be used to find more information on the owner of a website that is publishing harmful content. You can judge the credibility of the publisher with the information found on the site.

10 ways to bust fake news online especially during the Coronavirus pandemic.

1. Watch out for clickbait headlines

Headlines are designed to get attention to gain more clicks leading to more website entries. This increases advertisement revenue for the owner. As users we are pushed to click on or share these articles. So it is important to identify these among the rest of the articles on the internet.

These titles increase your curiosity and are meant to provoke you. As opposed to resisting them, the easiest way to identify them is through the 'name to tame it' method. Psychologist Dr. Dan Siegel explains this method as a way to get the rational side of the brain to recognize the emotion the article provokes in you. It can range from fear to anxiety to joy.

2. Listen to miracle cures and conspiracy theories with a grain of salt

During the pandemic, there was an increase in content providing cures and conspiracies regarding the virus. Not only were some humorous, but they were also dangerous. Especially articles on Facebook with recipes for concoctions to cure coronavirus. The simplest method to tackle this is to run a Google search in the news section where you can check the most updated news article on the subject.

3. "Friend of a friend" is not a reliable source

There is a trend noticed on WhatsApp groups to share messages with the caption, "a friend sent" or "share immediately" creating a sense of urgency.

These captions create a sense of responsibility to share the message soon. A connection is made by saying, "this message is sent from my uncle in the authorities…" to create a sense of reliability among the group so that people share the content.

To tackle this, WhatsApp has a new feature which shows if a message has been forwarded many times. Since these narratives are difficult to control on messaging apps, it is important to verify messages before circulating them.

4. Check the date of news shared

Adding 'forwarded as received' to the end of a message will not relieve you of responsibility. In 2020 (close to the Parliamentary elections) there was a shared article showing Sri Lanka ranked the first in the world for healthcare by the WHO. This message gave the public the impression that Sri Lanka was managing the pandemic the best in the world. However, the original content was an article published in 2018 where Sri Lanka's healthcare was praised by the WHO.

5. Just because the logo of a credible organization is shown, it doesn't always mean it's true.

Some accounts mimic the content of verified pages. This can be challenged by looking for news through the official websites or social media pages of these organizations. Make sure to look out for the 'verified ticks' which show their credibility.

6. Does it look reliable?

Sometimes a simple look into the grammar and language of the content can show its credibility.

- Google reverse image search is a tool that can be used to solve this. A right click option on the image will allow you to look for its image search. This will give you options for where the image shows up or was uploaded. You can also upload an image you want to verify and reverse search it.

- Search on internet archives via https://archive.org/. You can upload the link of an article you want to search for and see if the original post has been edited previously. It will also show the times the post has been archived at the websites. However, it is important to note that admin from the website itself can edit the site from the backend.

- Search for videos on Amnesty video viewer via https://citizenevidence.amnestyusa.org/. This tool can help you track YouTube videos and search for their information.

7. Check out the comments sections.

This can be an opportunity to see what others on that same platform think. Be careful to watch out for trolls. Suspicious looking profiles or fake accounts are made for 'trolling' and it's best to avoid engaging with them.

8. Is there an agenda?

This is where the context of the fake news content needs to be looked at. Are they trying to sell a product or further a political/economic agenda? Sometimes fake news pages carry an ultra nationalistic narrative. They show a stereotype of a community as an idea and make people feel safe within it. This becomes easier to internalize and leads to hate speech. It's important not to consume these content and move past them or as an active measure, identify them and flag these posts on the social media pages.

9. What do the fact checkers say?

Fact checking organizations and pages work intensively into screening content and reporting them if they come under hate speech categories. Facebook also carries features which allow it to label content as 'false information' after being checked by independent fact checkers. These features do not always work across the board but are effective steps in the right direction.

Some fact checkers to follow:

- https://www.facebook.com/hashtaggenerationsl/
- https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-sri-lanka
- https://srilanka.factcrescendo.com/
- https://www.citizen.lk/FactCheck

10. If you see something- then alert fact checkers!

Hashtag Generation is a youth organization that works in fact checking hateful content on social media. You can directly contact them via:

- www.hashtaggeneration.org
- hello@hashtaggeneration.org

Counter Speech

Counter speech is any direct response to hateful or harmful speech which seeks to undermine it.

They usually come in two forms:

1. Proactive: organized counter-messaging campaigns
2. Reactive: spontaneous/organic responses

Reading material for more information:

Wright, Lucas & Ruths, Derek & Dillon, Kelly & Saleem, Haji & Benesch, Susan. (2017). Vectors for Counterspeech on Twitter. 57-62. 10.18653/v1/W17-3009.

How do we develop counter speech?

Long-term sustained messages are needed to counter hateful and harmful speech. This is what a usual process of creating counter messages looks like:

- Planning
    1. Identify the issue
    2. Is your response proactive/reactive?
    3. Carry out context analysis
    4. Research on the audience and platform
    5. Set goals: overall goal setting and micro goal setting
    6. Create a timeline
    7. Fix a budget
- Producing
    1. Craft your message: avoid motivated reasoning and hostile and dehumanizing approaches
    2. Seek verified sources, consent, and respect privacy
    3. Understand the format or medium you want to use
    4. Understand the language and accessibility of the audience
    5. Create your content
    6. Test and finalize the content

- Publishing
    1. Look into the platform ecosystem
    2. Customize the content for the platform
    3. Analyse when you will post and how often
    4. Boost and advertise your content to promote it

- Post-publishing
    1. Look into audience engagement
    2. Ensure safety and security
    3. Monitor and evaluate how well your content did

Parameters for success

- The parties who made the original (hate) speech have constructively changed their belief/s

- Others who witnessed or participated in the exchange between hate speech and counter speech have had their beliefs and/ or behaviour positively influenced by it

- Audiences of counter speech begin to exercise more skepticism, diligence and reflexivity when they see or experience hate speech

- Audiences of counter speech are motivated to further disseminate them

Free and user-friendly sites that you can use to create and manage your content:

Creating graphics, editing photos, creating a logo

Canva https://www.canva.com/

GIMP https://www.gimp.org/

Pixlr https://pixlr.com/

Wondershare https://ps.wondershare.com/home

Access stock photos

Canva https://www.canva.com/

Pexels https://www.pexels.com/

Unsplash https://unsplash.com/

Pixabay https://pixabay.com/

Freepik https://www.freepik.com/home

Envato https://elements.envato.com/

Video and audio editing

Avidemux http://avidemux.sourceforge.net/

Audacity https://www.audacityteam.org/

Wavosaur https://www.wavosaur.com/

Wevideo https://www.wevideo.com/

Kate's video toolkit https://kate-s-video-toolkit.informer.com/

Animaker https://www.animaker.com/

Bots

Cheap Bots, Done Quick! https://cheapbotsdonequick.com/

Artbot http://artbot.combinatorium.com/#!/tracery

The bot ideas generator https://matteomenapace.github.io/random-generator-generator/examples/bot-idea-generator/

Social media management

Hootsuite https://hootsuite.com/en-gb/

Buffer https://buffer.com/

MediaCMS https://mediacms.io/

Resources

The following are the writings by and interviews with the speakers featured during the course of the 'Countering Hate Speech' series.

Dr. James Gomez
Hate Speech in Southeast Asia - New Forms, Old Rules
https://asiacentre.org/hate-speech-in-southeast-asia/

New hate speech rules threaten Asian democracy
https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1953460/new-hate-speech-rules-threaten-asian-democracy

Gehan Gunatilleke

Countering Harmful Speech: Why Trust the State?
https://groundviews.org/2020/12/17/countering-harmful-speech-why-trust-the-state/

Hate Speech in Sri Lanka: How a new ban could perpetuate impunity
https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/hate-speech-in-sri-lanka-how-a-new-ban-could-perpetuate-impunity/

Saijai Liangpunsakul

Is Facebook Responsible for Mass Killings in Myanmar? – The Role of Platforms
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAKm_OOo6UI

How technology and empathy can change lives
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVF1hUTVZOw

Deepanjalie Abeywardena

Muslims and Market Monopolies
https://groundviews.org/2021/04/21/muslims-and-market-monopolies-unpacking-a-prejudice/

Easter Sunday Attacks: Phobias, Prejudices, and a Paradox
https://groundviews.org/2020/04/14/easter-sunday-attacks-phobias-prejudices-and-a-paradox/

Hasini Haputhanthri

Conflict, Confluence and Continuity
http://momac.lk/conflict-confluence-and-continuity/

The Greater World: Islands, Oceans and Beyond
http://momac.lk/the-greater-world-islands-oceans-and-beyond/

Hashtag Generation

Mahishaa Balraj, Senel Wanniarachchi, Nethmini Medawala, Darshatha Gamage

Sri Lanka: Social Media and Electoral Integrity
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qQKubeK1HtAtom3J5v2BKoQ5hToH9ma_/view

What Facebook tells us about social cohesion in Sri Lanka
https://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Social-Media-Analysis-draft-8-1-1.pdf

Countering COVID-19 hate speech
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbrTxESVUrA

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

Since 1982, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) has contributed to the world of ideas, and has informed policy and practice through research, dialogue, the creative arts and other interventions.

The ICES vision is contained in a desire for a world that celebrates diversity in all its multiple shades. The unique mission of ICES is to deepen the understanding of ethnicity, identity politics, conflict and gender, and to foster conditions for an inclusive, just and peaceful society, nationally, regionally and globally, through research, publication, dialogue, creative expression and knowledge transfer.

The ICES has been an important player in the areas of reconciliation, justice, gender and human rights and has been particularly influential in shaping policy and public imagination on issues of gender equality, ethnic diversity, religious coexistence, and constitutional reform in Sri Lanka. In recent years ICES has carved a niche for itself as a centre for the study and promotion of diversity within a framework of democracy and human rights. It has generated important research on ethno-religious violence and coexistence, gender equality, women's economic empowerment, social inclusion, and forced displacement. It has also provided a space for and encouraged creative expression as a vehicle for political and social change, through its support to documentary film-making, socially relevant theatre, seminars for writers, and regular film and art festivals.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a German-based foundation working in South Asia as in other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education. It promotes a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic social order, and aims to present alternative approaches to society and decision-makers. Research organizations, groups for self-emancipation and social activists are supported in their initiatives to develop models which have the potential to deliver greater social and economic justice.

Countering Hate Speech: Towards Safe Digital Spaces

The webinar series 'Countering Hate Speech: Towards safer digital spaces' was hosted by ICES throughout the month of June 2021. Over 5 sessions, speakers discussed the socio-political contexts that give rise to hate speech, the issues with regulating speech, and how hate manifests itself in media in Sri Lanka. The series closed with two technical sessions that guided participants through tools and critical thinking to assess information they encounter as they navigate mainstream and digital media.

This publication presents some of the key points raised by speakers during the series, and also provides added resources from these experts to allow readers to explore, further their knowledge, and critically engage with issues of hate speech, media, and regulation in their countries and contexts.

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