

7. Bangladesh: Social media, extremism and freedom of expression

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When debating the rapid transformation of journalism in Bangladesh, from local media consumption to the growing influence of transnational media – as well as the challenges faced by Bangladesh – it is important to know the country’s cultural makeup, recent trends and demography. Bangladesh is a secular, Muslim-dominated country which has experienced solid economic growth over the last two decades and transformed itself into a middle-income country. The population of some 165 million people is very homogenous with 98 per cent of the population ethnic Bengalis with Bangla as their mother tongue and an adult literacy rate of 73 per cent (UIS, 2018). It is a model country for successful social progress that quickly achieved most of its millennium development goals (BPC, 2015). Bangladesh is one of the very few countries in the world which observes public holidays respecting the festivals of all the four main religions, including Eids, Pujas, Buddha Purnima and Christmas (Elliott, 2015: 48). It is a secular country with peaceful coexistence between religions, although polarization is growing. Parts of the society are becoming more radicalized and other parts are becoming more liberal, with the extremes on each side moving away from local culture and traditions. Atheism is rare and while it is not a punishable offense, it is socially despised, and online expressions that may hurt religious sentiments are punishable under the ICT Act with sentences of a minimum of seven years in jail (Freedom House, 2017). With more of the public dialogue shifting online, and a number of new, tight laws

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to regulate the online media being approved, the question is whether the freedom of expression as well as tolerance in the country really is being strengthened, or rather, limited, in this new media scenario?

Domination of Indian cable TV channels

Apart from a handful of foreign magazines available in a few selected kiosks, it was cable TV that brought foreign media into Bangladesh. English channels remain less popular, presumably because the cultural settings are less familiar and the English language is still a barrier for many. Indian TV shows, however, are vastly popular with the population and the most popular channels have higher viewership in Bangladesh than the most popular local channels. Some of the Indian channels have Bangla programs, while others are in Hindi, and the popular shows are drama serials, song contests, movies and sports. One problem often associated with foreign TV channels is the dilution of local values, a growing attraction for glamor and luxury, and a sneaking pollution of the language as it becomes studded with foreign words (Islam, 2013). It should be remembered that Bangladesh was a part of “greater India” until religiously divided by the British in 1947, then brutalized by the state of Pakistan through the independence war in 1971 where three million people were killed. This is the real root of the polarization: For 40 years, no war crimes tribunals were held and the traitors and collaborators could roam freely; among these were those who formed an Islamist political party with imported ideology sponsored by Saudi money and even got ministerial posts in a coalition government. The freedom fighters and pro-Bangladeshi masses struggled to rebuild their lives and felt forgotten and betrayed, while still maintaining a hope that justice would prevail.

Uptake of internet and early audience

In the early 1990s, dial-up connections to email servers were the only cyber connections available for people in Bangladesh. In 1996, internet became available through VSAT connections and only in 2006 did the country get its first direct fibre connection into the global internet (Hasnayan & Sultana, 2013). The country’s internet population grew from a few hundred thousand in 2006 to more than 70 million in mid-2017 (BTRC, 2018), an astonishing 60 per cent annual growth. The

country's internet population is so immature that roughly one third of the internet users in any given year did not use internet the year before. Since 2012, the growth of smartphones has been significant and considering that the desktop and broadband penetration in the country was low, it is obvious that it is the wide availability of smart phones, mobile Internet and affordable connection rates that now cause the rapid growth. How does the growth of Internet users look like in a country, which came online much later than the rest of the world, while the uptake is growing much faster than in other nations? Is this rapid growth a pure blessing for the nation or could it also be a curse in some ways?

Facebook = Internet

Imagine the millions of simple rural people in this country who until very recently consumed media content in terms of not-too-free news through radio and TV waves, joining crowds to watch sports or entertainment through satellite TV as well as reading a few stories in the local newspaper. Global media had no impact on their lives. Then one day they suddenly had access to Internet through their mobile, and their digital life began, more often than not, on Facebook (Karim, 2017). Basically, people in rural areas may still send you a confused look if you ask whether they are internet users, but when you ask them about Facebook they indeed use it. For them, Facebook is internet (Kader, 2017). This is very reasonable when considering their relevant physical world, which mostly is limited to the distance covered by their local bus service. Global media available through the internet will not bring much relevance for them, as there is hardly any content covering their own geographical area, nor does content from national news sites bring sufficient geographical relevance. Facebook, however, offers content created and shared by people they know, whereof many are from their local community, and as such these absolute beginners of Internet browsing somehow gain faith and interest in the content their connections now interact with. Considering their limited understanding of Facebook and the way the newsfeed works, few are able to separate between real news, spun stories or totally false content when they are being fed text, images and videos which their friends have shared, liked or even just been tagged into (Minar & Naher, 2018).

Communal riots fuelled by propaganda spread through social media

The lack of awareness as to how social media platforms work, and the utter lack of source control amongst the less mature internet users, has caused several cases of hate spin and mass manipulation to develop, and has given rise to tragic consequences in Bangladesh, of which a few examples are given below:

In September 2012 in the village of Ramu, a communal mob of up to 25,000 enraged Muslims, burned some 12 Buddhist temples, two of which were 300 years old, and destroyed at least 50 homes of the local minority Buddhist community (Moshiri, 2012). They were agitated by rumours that a Buddhist boy had posted an image on his Facebook page insulting the holy Quran. It was later found that someone had set up a fake account, posted an insulting image and tagged the Buddhist boy so that the image showed up on his wall. The perpetrator had then taken screenshots of the boy's Facebook wall and further manipulated this. When two Islamic radicals distributed the doctored images to local people who came to see, it triggered a chain reaction of hate of massive proportions in the local community (Manik, 2012). Of course, the agitated people – recipients of this misinformation – could not understand these technicalities of Facebook, especially when religious leaders called on the local people to act and told them that the Buddhists had insulted their religion. In this way these leaders created an angry, unruly mob. Though the content was local, Facebook as a transnational medium, had exposed the local audience to features they could not understand, and which could easily be manipulated to create hatred against the weak minorities in society. Hunt (2012) has challenged Facebook, raising its airing of fake accounts, the way it facilitates impersonation, tagging and the extensive reach of its network in the local communities, as well as the ease with which it is capable of spreading fake content designed to create hatred and polarization.

Just weeks earlier, there had been violent protests in the streets of Bangladesh, and many other Muslim countries, against the blasphemous amateurish film “Innocence of Muslims”. Though this film could easily have been ignored and forgotten, news about the initial protests it inspired caused a viral spread among Muslim groups and sparked international street riots (Venkiteswaran, 2017). The street protests were

growing. In mid-September 2012, the government gave in to demands and blocked Youtube in Bangladesh for a period of eight months (Paul, 2013). Youtube being a transnational medium is an open platform where any content that has passed the platform's internal rules immediately becomes publicly available to everyone. Both Facebook and Youtube are services designed in the US, with the US audience and their values assumed to be the standard consumer; they give less consideration to what implication such content could have on people in different cultures with different values and moral codes.

This perceived weakness on the part of the Bangladeshi government caused a domino effect of violent attacks (Rajpal & Baig, 2016), starting with the Ramu attack on Buddhists and building up to a terrifying killing spree during which militants armed with machetes hacked to death around 50 bloggers, atheists, gay activists, secular free-thinkers and liberal teachers. In brief, they attacked those sorts of people who raised their voices against radical Islam, especially through social media, and finally also innocent priests of other religions and random foreigners (Associated Press, 2016). It is widely believed that these gruelling attacks were executed in such way as to obtain wide press coverage, and enjoy a viral spread of manipulated content through social media, which in turn gave them access to the large international media. These attacks might thus portray the Government as weak and put it in a squeeze where, politically, it could not side with the non-believers. Ultimately the aim was to destabilize the country and cause the secular government to fall, in a strange play by religious groups and other actors playing with religious sensitivity (Rana, 2018). Most of the religious and political turmoil that marked this period, lasting from 2012 to 2016, was interconnected with activities on the rapidly growing social media in the same period.

By April 2016, an estimated 20 million persons in Bangladesh had started to use Facebook (Nafee, 2016), and as smartphones and internet access became increasingly available and affordable, they also came to use other social media (The Daily Star, 2018), but had very little idea, if any, about how to fact-check content or its sources (Minar & Naher, 2018). Younger leaders of some radical Islamic organizations had, however, understood this and mastered the art of manipulating content and spewing it out to the masses through groups and pages with

radical and hateful agendas (Abdullah, 2013). A popular strategy was to create online wildfires on sensitive issues by exploiting superstition and religious belief. Two examples out of thousands were (1) the use of an older photo of a collapsed building, and adding the text that Allah destroyed this cinema because it showed the blasphemous film “Innocence of Muslims” (Khan, 2012), and (2) using pictures of groups of dead people killed in a war somewhere in Africa, but adding the text that Government was secretly killing religious activists (Facebook, 2018). Both images were shared more than 10,000 times and fuelled hatred. Herein comes a big problem with Facebook, that there were absolutely no mechanisms for approving or removing such propaganda, and rarely would there be any response to requests to delete the content, as the moderators of Facebook had less idea about the Bangla language and the danger of circulating such false stories (Islam, 2015).

One bizarre example of manipulation of the masses is when a radical Islamic Facebook group, with more than a million followers, posted a photo-shopped image which showed the face of one of the most popular Islamic preachers, as the face of the moon (The Daily Star, 2018). This preacher had then recently been sentenced to death for participation in genocide, rape and murder during the liberation war in 1971, and the image was posted as a “real sighting” and an “omen” intended to prove the preacher’s innocence, and calling people to step forward and fight Government at any cost in order to protect Islam. The image achieved an extreme viral spread, and people believed they also had seen it with their own eyes (Itsmasud, 2013). The street riots which followed claimed nearly 70 lives (The Economist, 2013), a result of clever manipulation and blind believers. There is very little chance that this tragedy could have happened without being facilitated by a social media platform like Facebook.

Other issues related to how transnational social media have caused big social problems in Bangladesh include harassment of girls by creating fake profiles portraying them as prostitutes, or the filming of rape or sexual encounters – followed by pressuring the girl for more sex or money, failure to acquiesce would result in the videos being circulated on social media (Preetha, 2015). Until the end of 2017, 17,000 complaints regarding cybercrimes were reported to the ICT Division’s Cyber Help Desk in Bangladesh; 70 per cent of these were from women, even

though the vast majority of Internet users in Bangladesh are men. The effects of cyber-crimes against women are not limited to the victims in Bangladesh. They have a trickle-down effect on their families, the family's social status and eventually may even erode the social and moral fabric of the society (Zaman et al., 2017).

Furthermore, there were massive uses of fake profiles to manipulate public discussions from many sides, as well as serious attempts at character assassinations aimed at strong women and those with minority voices. Beyond this there was an almost infinite number of pages and groups spreading extremist content, hatred and fake propaganda, all aimed to spin an alternative reality for the general public. Facebook had neither any understanding of local sensitive issues and the gruelling violence in our history, nor any interest in understanding it; in fact, they had hardly any reliable routines for taking quick action against socially damaging content in countries they did not prioritize, like Bangladesh. As a female entrepreneur, I myself was several times threatened with death openly on Facebook as well as at public rallies and in phone calls. The threats on Facebook were accompanied by my picture, address and mobile number – all these were posted for everyone to see, and with commentaries confirming that an anonymous “they” would do it. Facebook almost never acts on reports or complaints, even not when approached by a government. When I managed to report the death threats to a Facebook country manager, through an Ambassador, the written answer stated that they could at best make the content hidden from Bangladesh but not delete it, as the threat lacked a place and time for my planned execution. In a word, there was no clear and imminent concrete danger. It is obvious from such cases that people who lacked international influence and high-level connections have no recourse when they want dangerous and unsavoury content removed.

The beginning of local social media – Bangla blogging

So how could social media be more adapted to and better fit into the local culture and society? I want to share my story of pioneering social media in Bangladesh, with the pros and cons of what we experienced along the way. In December, 2005, my team and I launched the first ever blog platform developed for Bangladesh, making it possible for Bangla-speaking Internet users to express themselves in their own

mother tongue. When we launched www.somewhereinblog.net, there were less than 50 bloggers in Bangladesh, most of them blogging in English. However, news spread rapidly by word of mouth and blogging became a big hit in the Bangla community. Within two months, we reached 1,000 registered bloggers, within two years, 10,000 and within six years we exceeded blogger number 100,000 in the country, and on our platform alone. Several new platforms have been launched since, most of these as copies of the concept and format used by our platform, but with a different approach to content, target groups and moderation policies. We had started a blogging revolution giving people a sense of belonging, and at the peak time for blog communities, in early 2013, there were several dozen blog communities in operation. Most active bloggers in the country, were then estimated to be between 200,000 and 300,000 (Freedom House, 2013), and they now belonged to a blog community, a very unique situation in the global blogosphere. Blogs were not posted to highlight one's own quality or style, but to create engagement and improve the society.

Toward the end of 2011, bloggers had become so influential in the local online community that they took pride in introducing themselves as bloggers, and their strength lay in the language used and the sense of belonging to a community. Blogging offered a new two-way communication and it was the perfect medium for massive content creation with high relevance in terms of language, topics and local community.

We, as the leading platform, crowd-sourced the development of a set of moderation practices to the bloggers and developed a set of rules, which was debated, adjusted and finally implemented. Blog posts, which were clearly against the freedom and sovereignty of the nation, against the constitution or against the law of the land were to be removed, as such content is illegal by law in Bangladesh (ATN News, 2012). Also, posts that included personal attacks, hate speech, libel, defamation, obscene or offensive content, illegally reproduced content, and so on, would be removed under these rules. We moderated language but not opinions; as such, we managed to get lively debates between believers and non-believers, between left and right, with a high ceiling of tolerance.

Bloggers became brave writers raising important issues, which had hardly been debated before under Bangladesh's strict social control.

They became an active force to push through a demand for holding the long-overdue war crimes tribunal. This had been pending since the country's independence in 1971, and now people who opposed this tribunal became wary of bloggers.

While the Arab Spring swept through many Muslim countries as the current decade began, the Shahbagh Movement – a movement to seek strict punishment for the war criminals and to rid politics of religious influence – was spontaneously initiated by bloggers and activists. This occurred in February 2013 (Bdnews24, 2013) and many of the outspoken bloggers were on the blog platform I operate. Thanks to social media, this movement grew quickly and, within days, had attracted tens of thousands of people, who demonstrated by occupying a busy road crossing, though the ruling party men soon infiltrated the organizers and manipulated the direction of the movement (Hossain, 2013).

Killings fuelled by hate speech on Facebook

During the early days, a blogger related to the Shahbag Movement was brutally killed outside his home by extremists. The killers wanted to garner attention from the murder and to portray the victim as an enemy of Islam. To this end they had secretly created a fake blog in his name on WordPress before killing him for his alleged blasphemous content, which they labelled a belittling of the Holy Prophet (Prithi, 2013). Here again, they were able to use one of the transnational social media, which lacked control or moderation of content, as a means to carry out their evil plot.

The opposition parties wasted no time and stirred up religious sentiments by labelling the whole movement and all bloggers as sinful atheists pursuing an anti-Islam agenda. After a couple of months with growing hatred against “atheist bloggers”, a new movement (Hefazat Movement) of up to half a million radical Islamic students and clerics emerged on the streets of Dhaka (McGievering, 2013), demanding death to bloggers and closure of all social media to save Islam. In an attempt to change the direction of the political wind prior to the national elections, the leaders of the opposition parties were most indulgent toward this religious movement. The Movement, including other radical Islamic groups, to a large extent succeeded in branding bloggers as atheists and scapegoats for all moral declines

in the country, thereby turning them into the most despised kind people in the society.

Their constant attacking of the “atheists” became acceptable to large parts of the population as a result of the Movement’s rampant propaganda to an audience that hardly knew what a blogger was, a campaign waged through their own pro-Islamic digital media channels, using many Facebook groups and a vast numbers of fake online profiles (Bdnews24, 2015). The tragedy was that even after several brutal killings which had shocked the nation, the radical Islamists behind the Hefazat Movement now managed to establish the concepts of “blog” and “blogging” as the enemy of Islam. The Hefazat Movement also submitted a list of thirteen demands to the government, including the death sentence for blasphemy, strict punishment for bloggers and atheists who commented on the Prophet and the total prohibition of free mixing of the genders, men and women, in public places (Mustafa, 2013).

Furthermore, the radical Islamists submitted a list of 84 named “atheist” bloggers to the government demanding the strictest actions against them (Subramanian, 2015). It was a chilling experience to find what appeared to be an almost infinite number of Facebook commenters supporting the killing of atheists and bloggers, asking for more bloodshed.

Many bloggers reported that public opinion about them had turned critical and violent. They now lived in fear of sudden attacks. Non-bloggers were even killed for protesting against the killing of bloggers and radical groups succeeded in terrifying the online users, threatening that anyone could be the next victim (Hammer, 2015). While there were almost no visible attempts to investigate the killings and nab the killers, the government chose to jail four bloggers in an attempt to please the radicals, a clear signal that killing atheists and non-believers was not a criminal act. This emboldened the radicals and for the next couple of years, targeted killings became a monthly exercise. At the same time, Facebook became a favourite platform for the killer teams to survey the scene, select a target, and prepare for the next killing. It was mainly ISIS, but also Al Qaeda, which were quick to claim responsibility, immediately following these killings. This they did through their websites and Twitter.

There was an outcry in the more educated parts of the civil society, a demand to arrest the killers and stop the manslaughter, but the police did not appear to have any success, top ministers kept denying the existence of ISIS or Al Qaeda in Bangladesh; in effect, resolving these killings seems not to have been a prioritized issue for Government. The most extreme example of killings by radical Islam in recent times was the Holey Bakery Attack, July 1, 2016, where 18 foreigners were amongst the total of 29 people killed in a terrifying hostage situation carried out by six or seven local ISIS recruits (The Daily Star, 2016), an attack that instantly shattered the emerging international image of a progressive Bangladesh. Facebook and transnational media were found to have played a crucial role in rapid radicalization of many of militant young boys (Counter Extremism Project, 2019), some of whom had been joyful, fun-loving, football crazy, popular young men from well-off families (India Today, 2019). Their friends had noted that they suddenly changed behaviour in matter of weeks, shifting towards extreme religious views, after which they had left the country without notice, usually a few months prior to the terror attack. After the attack, the police started mapping people who had suddenly disappeared from their families without a trace. They found trails of numerous people travelling towards Syria and ISIS territory. There is no doubt that religious extremists actively used Facebook and other transnational social media to spread propaganda, to stir up hatred and to reach out to vulnerable souls whom they attempted to recruit into militant groups (Patrikarakos, 2017). This could not easily happen through local social media, which has a superior understanding and knowledge of the society, and would not let such destructive activities happen.

Freedom of expression

Promoting freedom of expression is not particularly easy, especially not in a polarized country. The rapid growth of the Internet population makes Bangladesh an interesting case study for trends and issues that relates to freedom of expression.

The government has on several instances blocked access to popular websites and services. In January 2007, the mobile and internet networks were temporarily shut down during a government takeover backed by the armed forces, which led to the imposition of state of

emergency laws lasting two years. These laws prohibited the media from publishing any content criticizing the government. In 2010 and 2015, Facebook was banned for a period of up to three weeks for “content deemed inappropriate”, Youtube was, as mentioned earlier, banned once for a period of eight months in fear of upsetting religious sentiments, and several chat apps like Messenger, Whatsapp, Viber, Tango, etc. were banned for three weeks to prevent religious extremists from communicating and possibly planning terror attacks in relation to a sensitive judgement. In addition to these restrictions, the whole Internet has been shut down a few times for shorter periods, once termed a “drill” and other times termed a “mistake” (Colhoun, 2015).

Bangladesh is a country with lots of expectations on young students’ shoulders. There are few opportunities for kids to roam freely in the large cities; many who are studying thus live isolated lives with long study hours. Social media outlets open a new world to them and connect them to a world they would otherwise not discover. However, in their situation, this easily creates an addiction, which exceeds the limits acceptable to many families. Consequently, there has been a heated debate with the civil society, where many worrying about how this affects the upcoming generation. In 2016, the government proposed to shut down Facebook for six hours after midnight every night under the pretext of protecting children against online addiction, but after massive protests from media and groups working for freedom of expression, the idea was withdrawn and dropped.

Today, Bangladesh is a country where the Prime Minister repeatedly stresses that the press enjoys “full freedom”. However, the reality is that all media as well as social media users, apply a high level of self-censorship and mostly avoid controversial topics. There are several chilling factors, all of which have instilled great fear and reduced the lively online debate seen only 3-4 years ago. These include verbal attacks and harassment of media and journalists by leading political figures, scaring away advertisers, frequent intimidation by intelligence agencies, enforced disappearances (Mahmud, 2018), religious extremists ready to kill online opponents and new ICT laws stipulating a minimum of seven years in jail for hurting anyone’s religious sentiments.

In an attempt to build a legal framework to control the new media, the parliament has passed several controversial laws and programs,

which undermine press freedom and freedom of expression in the country. The original intention might have been to create a legal framework which effectively could stop the socially demeaning and tragic harassment of girls, but the final result is a law which very easily can be abused in order to jail activists, bloggers, journalists and even the intermediaries (the platform owners), for participating in the act of publishing content that someone may find offensive. The ICT Act of 2006, Section 57, has been translated as follows:

If any person deliberately publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted in the website or in electronic form any material which is fake and obscene or its effect is such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it, or causes to deteriorate or creates possibility to deteriorate law and order, prejudice the image of the State or person or causes to hurt or may hurt religious belief or instigate against any person or organization, then this activity of his will be regarded as an offence. (ICT Act, 2016)

Under the amended act of 2013, the minimum punishment without the possibility of bail is seven years in jail, to a maximum of 14 years plus a fine in excess of \$120,000 US (Freedom House, 2016). This paragraph has been used to jail several Facebook users for status updates on sensitive issues, and at least 21 journalists were sued under this paragraph in the course of only four months during the spring of 2017 (Adhikary, 2017). As mentioned, one visible result is a strict self-censorship among bloggers, Facebook users and many other media where people who previously were outspoken activists. They now keep silent and avoid sharing their reactions and opinions with the public. The high level of strict self-censorship is now also noticeable in the leading national newspapers and TV channel. The present ICT Act is a big threat to the freedom of expression in Bangladesh and many organizations and diplomats have requested that the government remove Section 57 from the ICT Act, describing it as a medieval law, which is being used to harass and silence activists and journalists.

In their eagerness to control the online media, the government is now mulling over a new “National online mass media policy”, under

which all online media have to be registered with the broadcast commission, assumingly local media only. According to news reports, “Any individual or organization uploading written or multimedia contents in Bangla, English or any other language via the internet from Bangladesh will be defined as an online media outlet” (Bdnews24, 2018), an impossible definition as it would declare every user of electronic media as an “online media outlet”. A justified fear is that the government’s grip on media and freedom of expression is likely to tighten and that the new laws could be abused to silence critical voices.

Local versus transnational media

In Bangladesh, public opinion on freedom of expression ranges from religious groups demanding a complete ban and the death penalty for the operators of many popular social media platforms, to liberal groups demanding absolute freedom of expression, with a general perception amongst the middle class that any content insulting religion, the country or women should somehow be controlled or blocked. Many blame Facebook in particular for the increased acceptance of radical Islamic ideas among many strata of the population. Facebook is blamed since the rather immature internet population of Bangladesh eagerly consumes a flood of political propaganda, odd religious beliefs and fake news – all without any idea that one ought to check the source or origin of these pieces of “information.” At the same time, there are a few individuals, perhaps hard-core atheists, who also actively use social media to ridicule and insult religious beliefs. Their forms of expression tend to cause millions to feel hurt and upset. For these varied reasons, many feel that the level of hatred and intolerance is accelerating in Bangladesh due to the presence of social media.

The government has several times had meetings with regional Facebook executives, even at the ministerial level, to demand faster and more efficient responses to its call for content moderation or to provide user details; these meetings have met with moderate success (Husain, 2017). There is an obvious need to control the spread of militancy and degradation of social and moral values since the abuse is severe and it inflames instability in the nation, but so far there are no clear signs of the Facebook authorities heeding such demands. Without some

meaningful collaboration, an unpopular national ban of Facebook may be the last resort.

Local presence versus remote administration

We have seen that Facebook is a social media platform lacking a local presence, lacking an understanding of the local culture and mind-set, and largely lacking interest when asked to moderate anything of danger to people or communities in Bangladesh. This lack of local knowledge and lack of response in times of emergency, when lives are at risk and villages are burning, in response to a Facebook photo (RT, 2012), is, in a way, tragic for countries like Bangladesh. Had Facebook been as responsible as the local Bangladeshi blog platforms, in terms of realizing the potential danger and acting quickly on highly offensive content, I believe that religious extremism and communal hatred would not have become endemic as it has today.

Tightening the freedom of expression is partially a belated response to prevent new attacks on minorities, spread of extremism and abuse of women online. Hate speech is not new and indeed was also been a problem before the age of the internet. For more than a decade, we have been calling for responsible blogging and properly observed social media etiquette. What is now worrying is whether we are at a point where social media will be the cause of social unrest and even conflicts spreading across nations? If so, is that a result of our abuse of the freedom of expression and failure to act responsible on social media? And if so, do we then deserve this unlimited freedom?

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