

Young People Countering Hate Speech on Social Media in Sri Lanka

Rapid Context Assessment Report



Cyber Guardians: Empowering Youth to Combat Online Hate Speech in Sri Lanka.

This study commissioned to **IDEAS (Inclusive Development Alternative Solutions)**
by Search for common Ground–Sri Lanka

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Report Disclaimer

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1. Executive Summary

Sri Lanka has an issue of reconciliation and coexistence. The problem has existed and has filtered down over the years. This vulnerability of its people has a history of over a century. The present is volatile as the scenario involves the dissemination of information and or misinformation using social media which spreads hate speech faster than in other periods of history. The use of the internet and social media is growing rapidly and the exposure of the youth demographic into these platforms is high.

“Hate speech” in Sri Lanka has been prevalent for many years and discussed by many including activists, researchers as well as policymakers, policy advocates and educators in various platforms and in various dimensions. It has been deliberated and examined over a long time. It has surfaced dominantly in local and international forums and has a great impact on society in current times. While there are impact issues globally it has had a profound effect on Sri Lanka. The issue has got more attention in recent times with the emergence of online and social media which has contributed to the evolution of greater forces producing hate speech than in the past. To understand hate speech in Sri Lanka, there is a need to refer to the context of the country’s civil war, and the subsequent, albeit slow, reconciliation process since 2009.

The objective of this study is to understand the nature and scope of hate speech in Sri Lanka prevalent in social media and how it provokes violence among communities. It focuses on the involvement of youth and their contribution to hate speech. This will lead to conceptualizing - how youth can be involved to promote peace in the country.

The Methodology used in this study adopted a blend comprising: Desk Review, Online content monitoring and Key Informant Interviews conducted among a range of stakeholders. It interconnects these three aspects. Validation of Desk Review findings are substantiated by Key Informants Interviews. Locating of pages which provoke it connects hate speech to the Desk Study Review and Key Informants Interviews. The assessment used data obtained from different sources including government and non-government sources. The government data was not updated while data from independent research organizations and other institutions was not a national representation.

As this is a rapid assessment report, the methods used for data collection were limited. The rapid assessment has not focused on other demographic data apart from the above-mentioned methods.

Social media is a major medium for the dissemination of news and views across a wider audience. This is fast and closer to real-time spread. These media are followed and used by a growing population in Sri Lanka. Most people with mobile phones use an Internet connection and are switched onto some form of social media. The population receives more information through these platforms than the traditional sources of print, radio and television media.

An important conclusion is that most hate provoking sites target younger demographics. The gullible young are prone to share the post across a wider group of people without considering its repercussions, within their network and identified to the same vulnerable age group.

When promoting peace and reconciliation through social media, it would be effective to use Images and facts, figures and statistics. To distribute such messages through various platforms of social media, Facebook could be more impactful. It is important that the design and presentation be attractive and also be able to generate interest among youth.

It is important to have a trained team of youth working in promoting peace through social media. The concept of peace and reconciliation must be part of the curricular from the formative years to achieve harmony among the youth. It is important that it empowers the youth to understand and recognize the country context, political structure, conflict while peace takes a key spot.

2. Introduction

“Hate speech” is a topic that is discussed, deliberated and examined over a long time period. It has surfaced dominantly in local and international forums and has a great impact on society in current times. While there are impact issues globally it has had a profound effect on Sri Lanka. It merits consideration as a suitable topic of study so that a better understanding of evolves.

Hate speech is defined as intentional or unintentional public discriminatory and/or defamatory statements; intentional incitement to hatred and/or violence and/or segregation based on a person’s or a group’s real or perceived race, ethnicity, language, nationality, skin colour, religious beliefs or lack thereof, gender, sex, political beliefs, social status, property, birth, age, mental health, disability, disease. ¹

Hate speech in Sri Lanka has been prevalent for many years and is discussed in various forums in different dimensions. With the emergence of online/social media platforms in recent times, there has been a wider discussion on the evolution of greater forces producing hate speech than in the past.

Since its independence, the Sri Lankan case of hate speech shows that nationalism and extremism can be filtered through periods of history. The history dates over a century. Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), known as the father of Buddhist Revivalism in Sri Lanka, had an anti-imperialist and nationalist agenda. His hate-filled speeches mostly against the Tamils and Muslims have been documented by Scholars such as Tamibiah and KM De Silva ² stress the fact that the formation of a collective ‘Sinhala consciousness’ by various leaders of the local community towards the end of the 18th century, subsequently resulted in the denial of the multi-ethnic character of Sri Lankan Society. This, they argue, became a major point of tension among the Sinhalese and the minority groups. Hate speech shows seeds of suspicion and hostility that get established adequately to provoke action. Prejudice built up over decades has contributed to communal violence; erupting periodically since 1958.

Anagarika Dharmapala used a mix of advice, rhetoric, and invective—berating specific ethnic or religious minorities. He used motorized transport and loudspeakers, which was new at that time, to spread his views across the country. The use of modern transport and communication equipment at that time helped him reach a wider area in lesser time.

To understand hate speech in Sri Lanka there is a need to refer to the context of the country’s civil war, and the subsequent, albeit slow, reconciliation process post-2009. This conflict caused division in Lankan Society along ethnic, religious and political lines. This creates various forms of ultra-nationalism at the expense of encouragement of national healing. Political parties have and continue to exploit these multiple divisions for short term political gain

Sinhala and Tamil language newspapers of post-war Sri Lanka; use racially charged language which accommodates and fuels unverified extremist viewpoints without any counterviews.

¹<http://www.inach.net/wp-content/uploads/WHAT-IS-CYBER-HATE-1.pdf>

²<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/saving-sinhalese-buddhists-from-sinhala-buddhism-challenge-for-post-easter-sri-lanka/>

TV channels, chasing ratings, also fan flames that set alight communalism that spread like wildfire. This escalates emotive behavior that leads to reigniting communal violence. The evolution has been the result of a long term emotive bitterness. The repeated messages by users and abusers of social media provide the sparks to ignite and set ablaze conditioned stimulus that produces a conditioned response.

In recent times, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has been the direct target of most hate speeches. Hate speech refers to “expressions that advocate incitement to harm based upon the targets being identified with a certain social or demographic group” (UNESCO 2015). In the public debate related to issues of awareness, a broader definition has been applied and used. A case in point is the commonly used definition by the Council of Europe where “Hate Speech” is understood as “covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin” (Council of Europe, 1997). Hate speech traditionally covers expressions in any form deemed humiliating to any race, religious, ethnic or national group. This phenomenon can be expressed in a form of racism, xenophobia, interethnic hostility or intolerance, instigating violence, hatred or discrimination.³

The new force of hate speech that provides an exponential increase is “Cyber Hate,”. This has the potential to spread at an alarming rate with devastating consequences on the offline world⁴. Defined by the Anti-Defamation League as: “any use of electronic communications technology to spread anti-Semitic, racist, bigoted, extremist or terrorist messages or information,”. “The electronic communications technologies include the Internet (i.e., websites, social networking sites, 'Web 2.0' user-generated content, dating sites, blogs, online games, instant messages, and E-mails) as well as other computer objective- and cell phone-based information technologies (such as text messages and mobile phones)”.

The objective of this study is to understand the nature of hate speech in Sri Lanka on social media and how it provokes violence among communities. It focuses on the involvement of youth and their contribution to hate speech. This will lead to conceptualizing - how youth can be involved to promote peace in the country.

³Coliver, S. 1992. Striking a balance: Hate Speech, Freedom of Expression, and Non-Discrimination., www.wcl.american.edu

⁴<http://www.inach.net/wp-content/uploads/WHAT-IS-CYBER-HATE-1.pdf>

3. Methodology

The Methodology used in this study adopted a blend comprising: Desk Review, Online Study and Key Informant Interviews conducted among a range of stakeholders. These three aspects are interconnected. Validation of Desk Review findings are substantiated by Key Informants Interviews. Locating of pages which provoke hate speech is connected to the Desk Study Review and Key Informants Interviews.

Desk Study Review:

The material for the desk review is from recognized and published research documents that help the research of the subject “hate speech” in Sri Lanka. This is the key tool used in this assessment. Review of available literature was to answer the key questions in order to gauge a clear understanding of the topic and in the present context

The study reviewed reports, articles, publications published within 10 years from the date of the study and priority was given to those within the last 5 years. This was done to give weighted to recent events. In order to understand in the context of global trends, common definitions, agreements and similar conditions in other countries a fair selection of documents. Papers from the international stage were reviewed. Only authentic material was used for the review. The study reviewed 11 local reports, papers apart from official statistics and 6 international reports/ papers on hate speech in social media.

Key Informant Interviews:

These are Interviews with experts in the field of social media and other activists involved in countering hate speech in the country. The study covered 10 Key Informant Interviews. Key Informant was selected with the consent of the project team of Search For Common Ground and the study tried to cover diversified Informants, in terms of the subject area, age, and gender.

Online Study:

This is the study of and the nature of social media networks for available pages, groups, that promote hate and or peace in Sri Lanka. The study used information received from Desk Review, Key Informants Interviews in addition to empirical pieces of evidence to locate key pages that provoke hate speech or promote peace. The study utilized the tools “Sociograph” and” Grytics,” to analyze pages.

The below table provides key questions to be answered by the study.

Assessment Questions to be answered	
Key Assessment Question	Specific areas/questioned to be evaluated by the assessment
1. What is the overall context of SM and its usage in SL	- How is the online usage in Sri Lanka <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usage of internet - Usage of SM - Level of access to SM through mobiles - Percentage of active daily users of SM through mobiles - Percentage of Facebook users out of internet users

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - percentages of other SM platform users out of internet users - What are the common social media sites used in Sri Lanka? - What are the purposes of using SM by people? Anything in prominent? - Has SM replaced or substituted the use of other media in Sri Lanka? - What kinds of news/messages sent across /circulated through SM most?
<p>2. What is the extent of hate speech propagation in social media in Sri Lanka?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is called hate speech? Why? - What is meant by hate speech in SM? - What is the global & local context of hate speech propagation through SM (brief)? - How the evolution of hate speech in SM happened in SL? - What are the motivations of the “hate speech” promoters in SM? - To what extent the hate speeches have contributed to creating separation/ hate/ violence between SL communities? Any solid evidence that an online hate speech provoked off-line violence? - What are the legal aspects/regulatory mechanisms and their strengths/weaknesses or limitations related to hate speech propagation on SM in SL? - Are there any particular segments targeted by hate speech propagation? or hate speech targets, everyone? - What kind of “hate speech” reaches mass audiences? - What kind of “hate speech” do you see often in SM? (Memes, statements, speeches, videos or comments) in FB and WhatsApp? - Which segments of the population becoming vulnerable through hate speech?
<p>3. What is the role of youth in the identified context of hate speech on social media in Sri Lanka?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why the youth is more susceptible to be a victim of hate speech propagation in SM in the current context (key attractions, etc.)? - What kinds of roles that youth play in hate speech propagation on SM in SL? - What is the most used SM platform in promoting hate speech among youth? Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram? - What kinds of hate speech messages are propagated by youth in social media? What thematic areas they focus most of the time?
<p>4. What is the role of youth in promoting peace and reconciliation in social media in Sri Lanka?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are efforts/measures taken by youth to prevent/counter “hate speech” on SM and how effective are those? - What is the effectiveness of promoting peace in SM? - Is there any constructive counter-messaging strategy to promote peace? - What are the challenges to face when engaging the public/youth for the positive hate speech counter-messaging in SM?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is there any engagement of SL youth in promoting peace on SM? What is their specific role in peace promotion on SM in SL (originators/ distributors/ followers, etc.)? - What are the key strategies that can be employed /used to promote youth engagement for peace promotion through SM?
<p>5. What are the 10 hate provoking and peace-promoting social media networks (Tamil and Sinhala) in Sri Lanka?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the most prominent hate provoking SM networks in SL, Whom do they represent/their target audience and who do they oppose? - What is their agenda? - What are the most prominent peace-promoting SM networks in SL, Who do they represent and what do they promote?

4. Limitations

The research used data obtained from different sources in the use of data and included government and non-government sources. It is observed that the government data was not updated while data from independent research organizations and other institutions was not a national representation.

As this is a rapid assessment report, the methods used for data collection were limited. This assessment is based on Desk Study Reviews, Key Informants’ Interviews and Quick Online Assessment. The rapid assessment has not focused on other demographic data apart from the above-mentioned methods.

The rapid study focused on Facebook as the main social media as it is an open platform. WhatsApp, with limited scope, was used for analysis keeping in mind that WhatsApp is not an open group. However, WhatsApp and Instagram is owned by Facebook.

5. Findings

5.1 The overall context of social media and its usage in Sri Lanka

Today - social media has become a major medium for dissemination of news and views across a wider audience. This mode is followed and used by millions in Sri Lanka. Most people with mobile phones use the Internet connection and are switched onto some form of social media. This observation is validated by the data published in official sources. The population receives more information through these platforms than the traditional sources of print, radio and television media.

According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual report 2018, the total number of mobile telephone connections increased significantly to 32.5 million connections in 2018. Total fixed telephone connections declined by 4.6 percent to 2.5 million connections during 2018.

Total internet connections recorded a growth of 23 percent in 2018 with the support of increased fixed internet connections. Fixed internet connections grew to 1,530,099, while mobile internet connections increased to 5,733,062 during 2018. With these developments, total telephone penetration (connections per 100 persons) rose to 161.6 with fixed telephone penetration and mobile telephone penetration at 11.5 and 150.1, respectively. In the meantime, internet penetration (connections per 100 persons) stood at 33.5 by the end of 2018, compared to 27.5 at the end of 2017 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018).

A person aged 05-69 is considered a digitally literate person if he/she could use a computer, laptop, tablet or Smartphone as defined in Computer Literacy Statistics 2018 by Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka. Digitally literate population is expressed as a percentage to the total population, (aged 05–69 years) within the respective domain. Two out of five (aged 05 - 69) are digitally literate in Sri Lanka. Digital literacy is higher than computer literacy for all disaggregated levels, showing the drift from personal computers to smartphones/tablets⁵.

A study carried out by LIRNEasia - After Access: ICT Access and Use in Asia and the Global South involving a population in the age group 15-65 years found that 37% use the internet and 29% use social media. The study proposes that rural dwellers were almost as likely to own a mobile phone as much as urban dwellers.

Sri Lanka's gender gap (17%) in mobile phone usage was much higher than that of its global income peers but is more in line with South Asian countries. The income peers of mobile phone ownership in Sri Lanka are the population who are above the average income of the country. This is compared to a population who own a mobile phone whose income is less than average. Unlike more developed higher-penetration countries of Latin America and South Africa, gender inequality in mobile phone ownership remains a problem in most of Asia and Africa.

⁵<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/education/ComputerLiteracy/ComputerLiteracy-2018Q1-Q2-final.pdf>

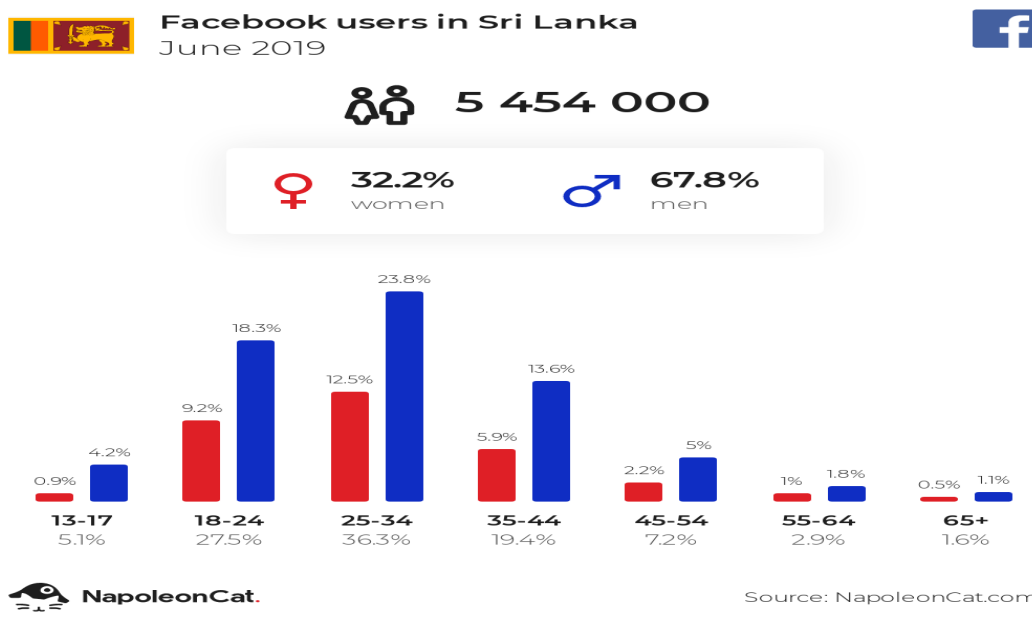


Figure 1: Facebook users in Sri Lanka, June 2019⁶

There were 5,454,000 Facebook users in Sri Lanka on June 2019, which accounted for 25.9% of its population. The majority of them were men (67.8%). People aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group (1,980,000 i.e. 36.3%). The highest difference between men and women occurs within people aged 25 to 34, where men led by 620,000 (1,298,052 male vs 681,750 female, which is 23.8% vs 12.5%).⁷

The Facebook users in Sri Lanka increased from 4 million in mid-2016 to more than 5 million in mid-2019 with more men using Facebook than women across all age groups. This is quite similar to the global trend of one billion Facebook members. 80% of Internet users aged 15-65 in Sri Lanka, use social media to make calls. That is 78% to read news and 76% to stay in contact with friends and family and chatting (text).

90% of users share their gender on social media, 88% share their real names and 70% share their religion. 49% of Internet users aged 15-65 in Sri Lanka always verify the truthfulness before sharing it on social media.⁸

It is noteworthy to mention that various sources provide different data on the usage of the internet and social media. Further, the available data is based on different timelines. This becomes a challenging task in comparing data. However, all sources indicate that there is a very clear trend in increasing the use of the internet, smartphones and social media.

‘After Access: ICT Access and Use in Asia and the Global South’ by LIRNE Asia revealed that of Internet users, aged 15-65 years, 9% of the sample population in Sri Lanka indicated that they had experienced online harassment⁹.

⁶ Napoleoncat <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-sri-lanka/2019/06>

⁷ Napoleoncat <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-sri-lanka/2019/06>

⁸ LIRNEasia, AfterAccess ICT access and use in Asia and the Global South, Version 3.0 — April 2019

⁹ LIRNEasia, AfterAccess ICT access and use in Asia and the Global South, Version 3.0 — April 2019

The same study revealed that respondents have been called by offensive names, purposefully embarrassed or criticized, physically threatened, being sexually harassed or being approached repeatedly by unwanted contacts (cyber-stalked). The same respondents indicated that cybersecurity issues related to their devices or their online accounts were very low. 5% of the Internet or social media users aged 15-65 in Sri Lanka respectively answered “yes”.¹⁰

Sri Lanka Computer Emergency Response Team- Coordinating Center (CERT-CC) conducted a survey named “Youth Survey on Social Media Security and Privacy” where they highlighted that social media has also led to an increase in incidents of cyberbullying, sexual harassment, privacy violations, and defamation. Statistics recorded at the Sri Lanka CERT - CC shows a 26% increase in the social media related incidents reported in 2015.¹¹

The nationwide survey was conducted with 1,000 adult Sri Lankans that were, divided into groups with respect to the above broad categories on social media. Among the sample of users, 74% use social media networks, 11% use media sharing of content, information, 9% of users use microblogging and 2% use blogs, microblogging and social news.¹²

The social survey-based research in early 2015 by Senior journalist and media critic Ranga Kalansuriya’s notes that “The primary results show that the internet, especially social media, is becoming a game-changer within the paradigm threatening the conventional media inconsiderably,” and in particular that “almost half of the sample feels that the media content impacted on their decisions to some extent at the elections while interestingly one third feels there had been no impact at all. The most impacted media was the television for almost 60 percent and then it was the internet for a group closer to 25 percent. The newspaper impact for less than 10 percent and radio impacted on only 5 percent.”¹³

5.2 The extent of hate speech propagation in social media in Sri Lanka

Definitions of hate speech depend on the country, region and sometimes even the organization that works on it. Definitions of hate speeches are described in the introduction section of this report.

All examples of hate speech were both selected and analyzed using a methodology that relied on definitions formulated by Benesch. More commonly, ‘hate speech’ is understood as “speech that attacks a person or group on the basis of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation” (Bytes for All 2014:5).¹⁴

Facebook defines hate speech as a “direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics—race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability.”. It also provides some

¹⁰ Id

¹¹ Sri Lanka CERT – CC , Youth Survey on Social Media Security and Privacy - 2017

¹² Selvarajah Thuseethan1 & Shanmuganatha Vasanthapriyan, Social Media as a New Trend in Sri Lankan Digital Journalism: A Surveillance <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/polls-social-media-during-the-jan-8th-electioneering-process/>

¹⁴ Shilpa Samarathunge and Sanjana Hattotuwa, September 2014, Liking violence, A s Facebook in Sri Lanka, , Centre for Policy-Alternatives

protection for immigration status. An “attack,” is defined as violent or dehumanizing speech, statements of inferiority, or calls for exclusion or segregation.¹⁵

Social media in Sri Lanka strengthens pro social democratic impulses which have a positive effect while anti-social democratic impulses are destructive. The broad landscape of social media use and abuse in post-war Sri Lanka (since 2009), mirrors the context in countries like Myanmar and the Philippines, and in elections or referenda held since 2015 in the US, UK, France, and Germany¹⁶. One KII respondent stated:

Hate speech in Sri Lanka also needs to be understood in the context of the country’s civil war, and the slow reconciliation since it ended in 2009. The conflict heavily polarized Lankan society along ethnic, religious and political lines, and energized various forms of ultra-nationalism. Instead of nurturing national healing, political parties have only exploited these divisions. (New Media Expert/Activist–Respondent 01–Male)

There is a worldwide, rapid increase of violence arising from widely shared hate speech through social media. These include racism, anti-Semitism, hate speech against sexual orientation which is spread widely online. With the growing Islamophobia, worldwide, people try to relate it to their local context and spawn anti-Muslim campaigns, attack on immigrants and vandalizing their places of worship.

In Germany, a correlation was found between anti-refugee Facebook posts by the far-right Alternative for Germany party and attacks on refugees.¹⁷ In the United States, perpetrators of recent white supremacist attacks have circulated among racist communities online and also embraced social media to publicize their acts.¹⁸ The 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooter was a participant of the social media network gab, whose lax rules have attracted extremists banned by larger platforms.¹⁹

The 2019 New Zealand mosque shootings, that killed forty-nine Muslims at prayer sought to broadcast the attack on YouTube.²⁰ In Myanmar, military leaders and Buddhist nationalists used social media to slur and demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority ahead of and during a campaign of ethnic cleansing. The UN fact-finding mission said, “Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate, in a context where, for most users, Facebook is the Internet”²¹ In India, in many cases of lynch mobs and other communal violence originated with rumors on WhatsApp groups²². These have been on the rise since the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014.

Though warnings on the spread of online hate speech have been sounded it went unheeded. A few concerned social activists and researchers have been gathering and analyzing evidence of rising volumes of hate speech, especially on Facebook.

¹⁵https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/hate_speech/

¹⁶Sanjana Hattotuwa Nov 2018, Digital Blooms: Social Media and Violence in Sri Lanka,

¹⁷https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3082972

¹⁸<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/06/inside-the-trial-of-dylann-roof>

¹⁹ On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/us/gab-robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shootings.html>

²⁰Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/>

²¹https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_64.pdf

²²https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/reports-of-hate-crime-cases-have-spiked-in-india/?utm_term=.96b127e98259

In the first such local study in September 2014, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) noted: “The growth of online hate speech in Sri Lanka does not guarantee another pogrom. It does, however, pose a range of other challenges to government and governance around social, ethnic, cultural and religious co-existence, diversity and, ultimately, to the very core of debates around how we see and organize ourselves post-war.”²³ Respondents 2 and 1 reported:

“... Inability to tolerate different points of view, different ways of life, inability to accept multiculturalism of this country. There can be other motives like business motives. This jealousy business rivalries became manifested as hate speech especially when companies are targeted, products are targeted...” (Social Activist IT/Media expert, Respondents 2, Male)

“... These days it is very common to vilify Muslim owned companies. But, in the past Tamil owned companies, Christian owned companies have been vilified. Probably the business rivals of those companies are behind it. They get those things done and released and then people uncritically share. Because the problem I see is social media users are uncritically sharing. And that is how the originators of this hate speech or dangerous myths are only few....” (New Media Expert/Activist–Respondent 01–Male)

They provoke hatred against minorities using emotional sentiments. The myth that Muslims are breeding and they are going to capture the country, in order to validate that point; we have seen hate provoking posts of sterilization pills²⁴, 2012 Nolimit toffees²⁵, etc.

“... this myth about Muslims becoming the majority population in another 50-100 years. This is a complete distortion of demographic data, which has been debunked, which has been completely proven wrong by demographers. But the average person especially the Sinhalese who doesn't know how demography works, the science of demography and the science of statistics, they believe this. They believe this complete distortion of statistics to say that by the year 2100 or sooner Muslims will have more than 50% of our population. Before that and since then it has been proven wrong. But, that dangerous myth is still being shared. It came out soon after the census data was released in 2012. People took the census data and misinterpreted it. And it was countered by statisticians and demographers. But the countering didn't get too much attention, it's a myth that still gets shared. So, if you look at it, it looks like a harmless image, harmless meme. But, it's very dangerous. Dangerous because it builds up fear, builds up suspicion of the other and demonizes the other.” (New Media activist/journalist, female)

When the issue of Niqab and Burka erupted in social media, often we could see a flood of posts setting in motion a halo effect of being the norm to promote a threat to national security. In the aftermath of Easter Sunday Attack on April 21, anti-Muslim riots have risen. Sri Lanka blocked WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media platforms to control the sharing of fake messages. Despite the ban, people accessed social media networks via a VPN. A Facebook comment was posted by a Shopkeeper named Abdul Hameed Mohamed Hasmar, "Don't laugh more, 1 day u will cry". The local Christians reportedly took this post as a warning of an imminent attack and a mob smashed his shop and vandalized a nearby mosque. The

²³Samarathunga, S & Hattotuwa, S 2014, Liking violence: A study of Hate Speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka, Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA). <https://www.cpalanka.org/liking-violence-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-in-sri-lanka/>

²⁴<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2018/03/18/features/no-such-thing-%E2%80%98sterilization-pills%E2%80%99-%E2%80%93-top-lankan-physicians>

²⁵<https://abdulhalik.wordpress.com/2012/04/03/the-great-no-limit-toffee-genocide-of-the-sinhalese/>

government imposed a curfew until dawn on Monday. This incident caused the escalation of violence to nearby towns resulting in Muslim owned businesses coming under attack.

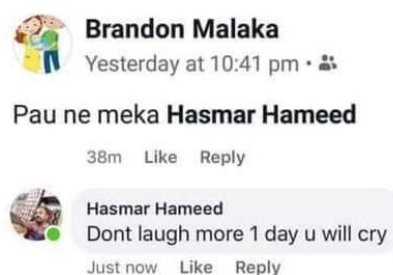


Figure 2: Screenshot of the comment

The irrational persecution of an award-winning Sinhala writer Shakthika Sathkumara for publishing a fictional short story is a case in point. He was arrested on 1st April 2019 for writing a short story on Facebook. He faces up to 10 years in prison if found guilty. He has been detained for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression, and he is a prisoner of conscience. Amnesty International has issued a worldwide urgent appeal for him.²⁶ How can Sri Lanka nurture the inherent openness of literature writers while addressing specific abuses of the online freedom of expression? This is the careful balancing act, which confronts us.

It is difficult to control hate speech in Sri Lankan social media with a mere ban on these platforms. The experience of 2018 March was that there was an increase in fake news and misinformation. While the ban on social media was active, the users have logged via a VPN. The policymakers who banned the social media, the President and the Prime Minister's Facebook pages were updated with frequent posts despite the ban. Legislation is not the answer to combating hate speech on social media. However, if it is implemented, there should be free and unbiased institutions to monitor. We could relate that, to the police or fire brigade which had not turned up to control the riots on minorities after the Easter Sunday attack. A study of hate speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka; looked at 20 Facebook groups over a couple of months. Focusing on content generated just before, during and immediately after the violence against the Muslim community in Aluthgama in June 2014. More generally, the study explored the phenomenon of hate speech online—how it occurs and spreads online, what kind of content is produced, by whom and for which audiences.

“On Facebook, it’s more memes but also sometimes a lot of comments. Now when a meme or image appears, it can be a news photography something that is happening say, an ongoing court case about human rights violation by armed forces or ongoing court case about Buddhist monk or something. So, there can be a news photograph but then underneath the number of comments includes very vicious hate speech against the judiciary, against the government or against anyone basically they think he is against their point of view.” (Ms. Raisa Wickramatunge, New Media activist/journalist)

Whilst the Muslim community in Sri Lanka—9% of the population—have been the direct target of most of such online hate speech contents, various other groups such as human rights activists, moderate politicians, clergy who advocate religious harmony, law enforcement, international human rights organizations and individuals, women, the LGBT community and

²⁶<https://www.republicnext.com/free-speech/amnesty-declares-writer-shakthika-a-prisoner-of-conscience/>

many citizens who don't identify with the hardline Sinhalese Buddhist cause have also come under attack of hate speech.

The debates around the prohibition of hate speech and the right to freedom of expression vary between these two competing types. On one hand, the mandatory regulation of speech depending on its content can undermine the fundamental right to freedom of speech. On the other hand, supporters of hate speech regulation in the media claim that the right to freedom of speech is not absolute. This is recognized in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which says that the right to freedom of expression carries “special duties and responsibilities” and, therefore, may be “subject to certain restrictions”.²⁷ “Ultimately, there is no technical solution to what is a socio-political problem,” said the CPA study highlighting the complexity of the challenge, given the sheer magnitude of users, content diversity and the speed at which hate speech is generated and shared. It added: “what is evident is that even without new legislation looking at online domains and content; there is a range of legal remedies and frameworks to hold perpetrators of hate speech accountable to their violence, whether verbal or physical. The issue is not the non-existence of relevant legal frameworks, but their non-application or selective application.”

Moreover, ShilpaSamaratunge and SanjanaHattotuwa mentioned in their study called Liking Violence, 2014 "In Sri Lanka specifically the guarding of religious freedom and guidelines around hate speech has existed in various forms for many years. Of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1978 Article 9, 10 and 14[1] [e] relates to provisions on religious freedom. Of these Article 10 states that “every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice”. Article 14 [1] [e] states that “ Every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching”. Additionally, several provisions in the Penal Code state that acts done to insult religion, religious places of worship and to disturb religious assemblies and gatherings as criminal offenses. This can be further attested with the own words of KII respondent and said:

“Social media is a form of expression, hate is hate. Only the content matters, not the form of expression. We have adequate legal provisions to take action against hate speeches. What we lack is the will of law enforcement authorities (Mr. Ali Sabri, Legal expert who are working on Hate Speeches)”

There are three clear acts to prevent hate speeches;

1. Penal Code
2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Act No. 56 of 2007
3. PTA–Prevention of Terrorism Act No 48 of 1979

There are many instances that people are arrested under ICCPR. It shows that we have adequate provisions to act upon hate speeches. However, it is evident that various types of racist hate speech are disseminated through the mainstream media; and law enforcement authorities are not acting against them. This has helped to foster a culture of impunity in the country. Nevertheless, law-enforcing authorities have misused the same Act. e.g. The

²⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactpol.shtml

Mahiyangana woman who was charged for wearing a cartwheel of a ship under ICCPR outlines the misuse of law.

We may need a social media monitoring and regulatory law or authority or institution and social media platforms like Facebook and other platforms need to support such intervention. However, the important fact is that the authority should not be biased but should be an independent, fair, free and transparent institution regardless of faith, race, and politics. Meanwhile, the CPA's 2014 report has recommended some systematic responses as well: enhancing digital literacy and strengthening the online community's capability to counter hate speech in real-time.

Other studies, for example by the Women and Media Collective (WMC), have documented how women in general and women activists, in particular, are targeted for online harassment, threats, and vilification. All this work has been released in the public domain. In any case, any law enforcement or intelligence officer could easily find examples of hate speech by spending a few hours on Facebook. Much of the material has been shared so openly and blatantly. Educated men and women have uncritically shared them.

Facebook acknowledged that they made serious mistakes²⁸ in not removing racial hatred posts in Sri Lanka which has directly or indirectly added more fuel during March 2018 Digana violence. In July 2019 Facebook officials visited Sri Lanka and stated that they have invested heavily in Sinhala and Tamil language experts.²⁹ They significantly ramped up their language expertise in Sri Lanka by hiring more experts. As per Raisa Wickramatunge, New Media activist/journalist:

“Facebook has increased the number of Sinhala and Tamil content reviewers. They are not saying how many, all they say is they have increased. And it is true, I meant even some young people that I know have been recruited and they are posted in Singapore, Dublin and elsewhere doing this. They also outsource into companies and then they get freelancers to review content. And that content reviewer is the second line of the platform responsibility. So, automatic removal doesn't happen, human reviewing especially in response to the complaints or reporting. So, one of the things we need to promote is responsible for moderate people in this country to report more and more. It's part of digital literacy. We can't say this is terrible and just move away. We have to report that. And that is done in confidence, of course, it takes a few minutes of your time. When reporting is increased, I think Facebook also will increase the number of reviewers who are dealing with the reporting, the complaints that are sent.” (Ms. Raisa Wickramatunge, New Media activist/journalist)

But, the challenge remains as Facebook took days to respond to some Sinhala words, hate speech uses a mix of Sinhala and English, sometimes the content doesn't violate community standards, but when understanding the local context, it is hate or violence. The issue of Wilpattu³⁰, on the face value it is apparently an environmental issue. However, underneath there is a communal issue. The posts will probe up, as ‘people should be punished for cutting trees’ phrases on inciting violence.

²⁸<http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/FB-admits-serious-mistake-in-not-removing-racial-hatred-post-in-SL-159003.html>

²⁹<http://www.dailynews.lk/2019/07/12/local/190952/facebook-ups-funds-sinhala-tamil-expertise?page=1>

³⁰Resettlement Of Muslim IDPs & Issues Of Wilpattu <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/resettlement-of-muslim-idps-issues-of-wilpattu/>

5.3 The role of youth in the identified context of hate speech on social media in Sri Lanka

It is the Youth that often uses social media in Sri Lanka. It is very clear that youth under 25 to 30 years of age are the biggest demographic group represented as social media users. They are also not so experienced and matured to examine critically what they see. They can be easily brainwashed by different political or nationalist forces. Moreover, the education system has not prepared them to assess anything critically. For all these reasons, they are more prone not only to consume but also share.

More youth are distributors, followers, or sharers of hate speech propagation though there are a handful of youths who are the originators of such posts. Respondent 1 said:

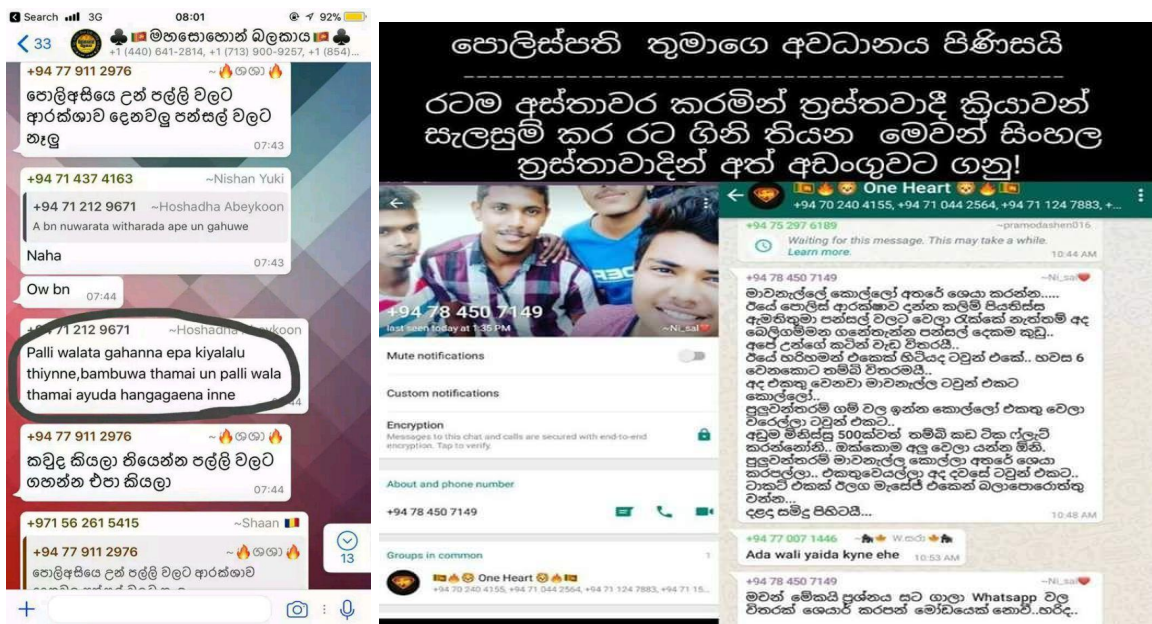
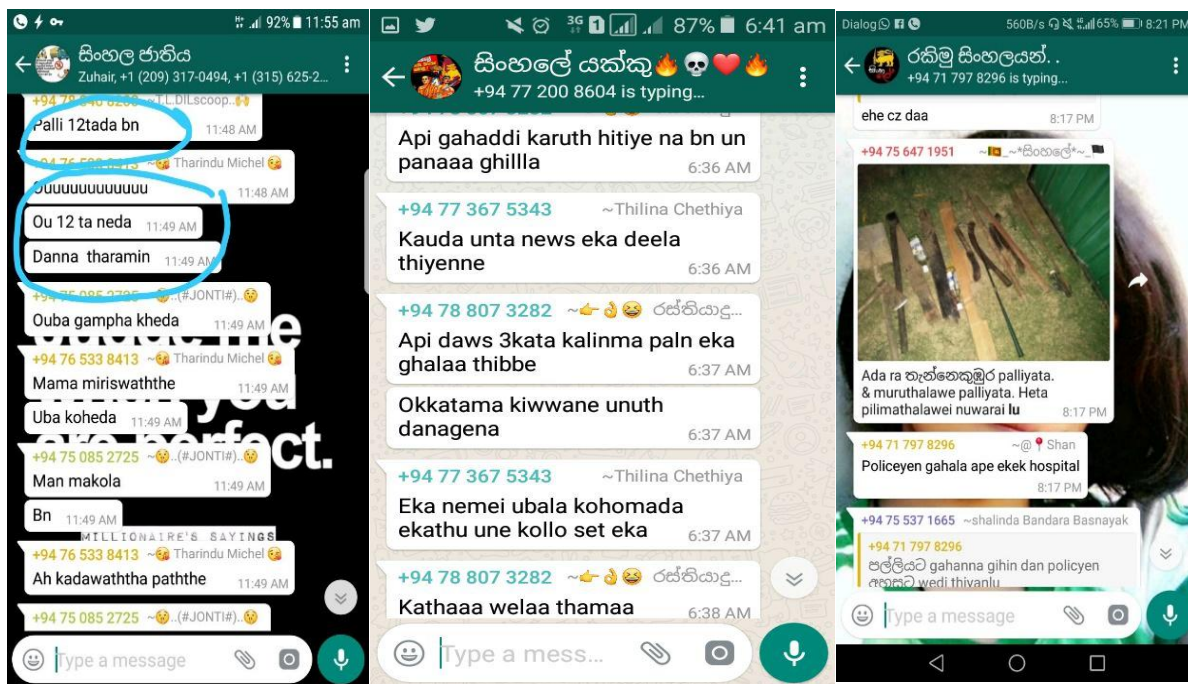
“I heard there are cyber armies of leading political parties and leading nationalist groups who keep generating these. It is not only hate speech; but also mudslinging on political opponents and hatching various conspiracy theories against Americans, against the Vatican, simply; against everything. They are a few; maybe they are a few hundred for all of Sri Lanka. There are in their tens of thousands and millions.” (New media expert/Activist, Respondent 01, Male)

Hate speech provokers create memes, Facebook stories and even short stories that are highly attractive to the younger group of the population. Racism and religious-hatred are the thematic areas in which youth focus to propagate hate speech in social media platforms. Condemning other races, religions, and cultures is the modus operandi which they used to propagate hatred.

When analyzing the posts on Facebook immediately after the incidence of violence, especially the Easter Sunday attack and Digana riot, hate messages it was found that the hate messages targeted the young generation, and they spread the message faster. It is evident that during such incidents, the number of shares also increased drastically. Moreover, the designs of such hate posts are more appealing to the younger generation and most of the messages request to share or act upon the message on the post. During and after such incidents, the hate messages of Facebook pages are again channeled through WhatsApp groups. According to Raisa Wickramathunga:

“I am told that during the Digana riot; especially on WhatsApp that there is direct location-specific targeting, asking people to go to a certain location, attack certain premises, certain businesses. Lot of that happening on WhatsApp rather than open platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Making it harder to investigate for criminal investigators or researchers” (Ms. Raisa Wickramatunge, New Media activist/journalist)

The following screenshots of the WhatsApp group implies that the youths were gathered by inciting hatred and provoking Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism. One of the youth peacebuilding activist further validated the so-called situation as follows:



“There is no doubt that most of the youth in Sri Lanka use social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp than other media. They can be targeted by hate speech provokers easily, and also youth may take such messages without a logical analysis. The important thing is youth are connected thousands of people, especially youth via social media. They tend to spread such a message across their contacts (Mr. Thushendra, Project Manager, Youth Engagement for long-lasting Peace, National Peace Council)

5.4 The role of youth in promoting peace and reconciliation in social media in Sri Lanka

The youth who engage in promoting peace and reconciliation across Sri Lanka through social media are only a few. When analyzing these youths, they tend to be living in a multicultural society, engaged with community organizations, rotary clubs and associated with friends from different cultures and beliefs. Moreover, they seem to have really understood the context and embracing different cultures and traditions, which had led them towards peace and reconciliation.

The assessment shows that there are only a few youths who are working to promote peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. They are not grouped together. In fact, they engage in promoting peace and reconciliation in their own ways and within their circle. Contrary to the youth who provoke hatred and who are well organized and connected, peace-promoting youths should unite to combat hate speech. A youth Sri Lanka Unites, a leading youth network in Sri Lanka said:

“Sri Lanka Unites has been named or chosen by Facebook as an official partner to take down hate speech content, anything hate speech, to take it down. We have a few companies who are assisting us like giving 2 hours per week or number of hours per day where their employees would go into Facebook and take down whatever hate speech content can be seen. So, they are volunteers on behalf of Sri Lanka Unites.”
(Representative from Sri Lanka Unites)

Many organizations and associations, which engage in peace and reconciliation efforts especially on youths conduct more offline or physical events. Their programs and events were reflected on their social media channels. Beyond that, we could not find any engagement directly combating hate speech online. When inquired about combating hate speech online, they state that they do not use the same strategies as memes or images to promote peace and reconciliation.

However, the editor of Groundviews has a different opinion on it. Ms. Raisa Wickramatunge says that,

“We should use the same strategy what hate speech provoking pages use. To combat hate speech, we should use memes, humor and short stories to promote peace. The youths who are in the IT sector could also contribute to this. I could relate an example from Myanmar, where a peace message sticker campaign launched named “Flower speech” which seems to be productive.”

The common challenges often faced by youth who promote peace and reconciliation are labeling or naming them as the “NGOs”. Mrs. Vidhya Kandeban, Co-National Director of Sri Lanka Unites, commented on the challenge that they face as follows:

“Everyone thinks it has a foreign hand, so that is the challenge. Of course with the kind of work we do, we mainly work with the grassroots level among the districts. Therefore, people are familiar with us, the common people. That challenge is not a big deal because we are familiar with the people/community.”

Ms. Nikita Samarathunga from MEND (Media Empowerment for a Democratic Sri Lanka) mentions that the positive experience of youth could be harnessed to encourage and engage them in peacebuilding activities. Video graphs and photography which are a vital component and mind setter connected and directly linked to social media can be used to lure youth in this endeavor. Their skills and interest can be used to produce positive promotion material as well as to educate others. Trained youth are engaged in various peace-promoting activities considering the experience they have. Mr. Thushendra, Project Manager, Youth Engagement for long-lasting Peace, National Peace Council, states that: "Youth can be used to promote peace and reconciliation in many ways. As they spend more time on social media, it is an important medium to get them to engage. We need to do it in an organized manner"

5.5 Hate provoking and peace-promoting social media network in Sri Lanka.

A large section of social media Networks use the channel to promote and provoke using hate speech against minorities. Many racist elements roam the web and provide impetus to those who spread hatred.

It was observed that when old pages which provoking hate speech are inactive or less active or reported they surface through new pages. Such new pages provoking hate speech use new strategies to avoid being reported. Some posts appeal to increase the number of likes and ask to share to ensure that the hate messages are delivered to a wider segment before these pages are reported.

The table below shows a list of Face book pages that provoke hate.

Name	Link	Likes	Followers	Page created	Admin	Manage Place
මල්වදාමා Malwadama	https://www.facebook.c	43,076	43,261	29-Apr-13	3	Sri Lanka
? Mana sinhala ey awulada	https://www.facebook.c	33,456	33,592	25-Nov-14	3	Sri Lanka
sinhale vesiyana	https://www.facebook.c	14,937	14,989	16-May-19	7	Sri Lanka
Sinhala Lanka Organization	https://www.facebook.c	10,083	10,302	31-May-19	2	Sri Lanka
sinhala vidwath ekamuthu	https://www.facebook.c	8,808	8,833	5-Aug-15	4	Sri Lanka
sinhala paribogika ha velayanda sangamaya	https://www.facebook.c	6,043	6,049	12-May-19	3	Sri Lanka
Manakkalpitha -	https://www.facebook.c	2,060	3,549	30-Apr-19	3	Sri Lanka
- Sinhala yan surakimu	https://www.facebook.c	1,624	1,628	25-May-19	2	Sri Lanka
CeylonBlood	https://www.facebook.c	4,226	4,310	21-Apr-19	2	Sri Lanka
Sinhala ya	https://m.facebook.com	2,556	2,586	1-Aug-12	2	Sri Lanka

- මල්වදාමා Malwadama <https://www.facebook.com/529129283795667/>
- මමසිංහල. ඇයිඅවුල්ද? <https://www.facebook.com/MamaSinhalaEiAulda/>
- සිංහලේවැසියන් - <https://www.facebook.com/SinhaleWasiyan/>
- Sinhala Lanka Organization - https://www.facebook.com/ceylonbl/?_tn_=%20Cd%20CP-

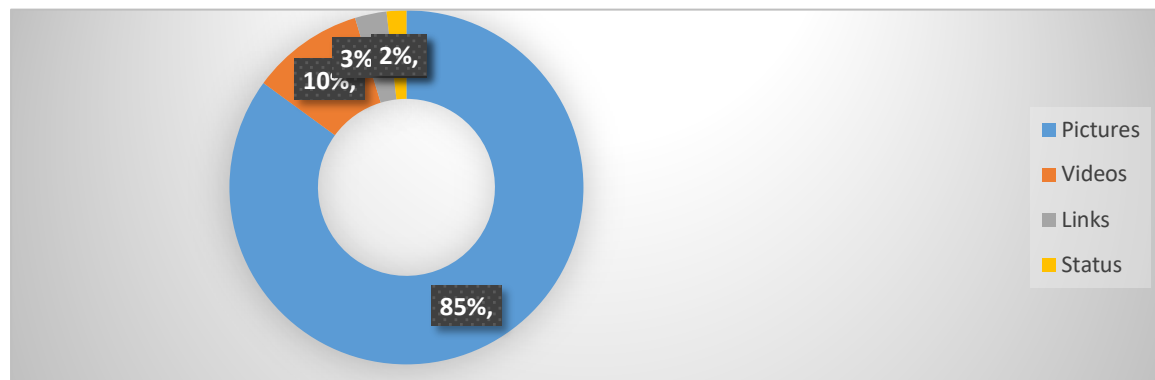
- [R&eid=ARCKuHkZD6VwvsH7bgqRHYPqLON0BCMyF_byxzuzNesj7vuR5adVqiT4QDcTe3GyH5SaBpj8XCCKQwqNVk](https://www.facebook.com/GyH5SaBpj8XCCKQwqNVk)
5. සිංහලවිද්වත්ඵකමුතුට <https://www.facebook.com/%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%82%E0%B7%84%E0%B6%BD-%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%AF%E0%B7%8A%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%8A-%E0%B6%91%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%94%E0%B7%80-1457440807914853/>
 6. සිංහලපාරිභෝගිකනාවෙළෙඳසංගමය - Sinhala Paaribogika ha welanda sangamaya <https://www.facebook.com/Sinhala.1st/>
 7. Manakkalpitha - මනකල්පිත <https://www.facebook.com/Manakkalpitha-%E0%B6%B8%E0%B6%B1%E0%B6%83%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%BD%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%B4%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%AD-2349551548623944/>
 8. සිංහලයන්සුරකිමු - Sinhalayan surakimu <https://www.facebook.com/%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%82%E0%B7%84%E0%B6%BD%E0%B6%BA%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A-%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%BB%E0%B6%9A%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%94-Sinhalayan-surakimu-676184226144242/>
 9. Sinhala Blood - https://www.facebook.com/ceylonbl/?_tn=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARCKuHkZD6VwvsH7bgqRHYPqLON0BCMyF_byxzuzNesj7vuR5adVqiT4QDcTe3GyH5SaBpj8XCCKQwqNVk
 10. සිංහලයා sinhalaya <https://www.facebook.com/sinhalayaone/>

5.6 Analysis of hate provoking pages on Facebook.

The below table shows the number of posts and types of posts published in the above pages during the period of 01st of January 2019 to 31st of July 2019.

Page	Number of posts	Picture Posts	Video-posts	Link-posts	Posts by fans
CeylonBlood	536	486	47	1	1
Manakkalpitha - මනකල්පිත	70	47	21	0	1
Sinhala Lanka Organization	363	276	78	1	3
Sinhalaya (සිංහලයා)	22	12	5	5	11
Mama Sinhala. Ey Awulda (මමසිංහල. ඇයිආවුල්ද?)	88	87	0	0	0
මල්වඩමMalwadama	319	288	16	2	0
Sinhala Paribogika ha welanda sangamaya- (සිංහලපාරිභෝගිකනාවෙළෙඳ සංගමය)	189	169	5	11	16
Sinhala widwath ekamuthuwa - සිංහලවිද්වත්ඵකමුතුට	82	69	10	0	0
Sinhalayan surakimu- (සිංහලයන්සුරකිමු)	302	283	9	8	1
Sinhala Wesiyana - සිංහලවෛසියන්	292	212	43	6	15

The graph illustrates the types of posts in percentage during the period of 01st of January 2019 to 31st of July 2019.



The below analysis shows the various types of interactions of each page listed above during the period of 01st of January 2019 to 31st of July 2019.

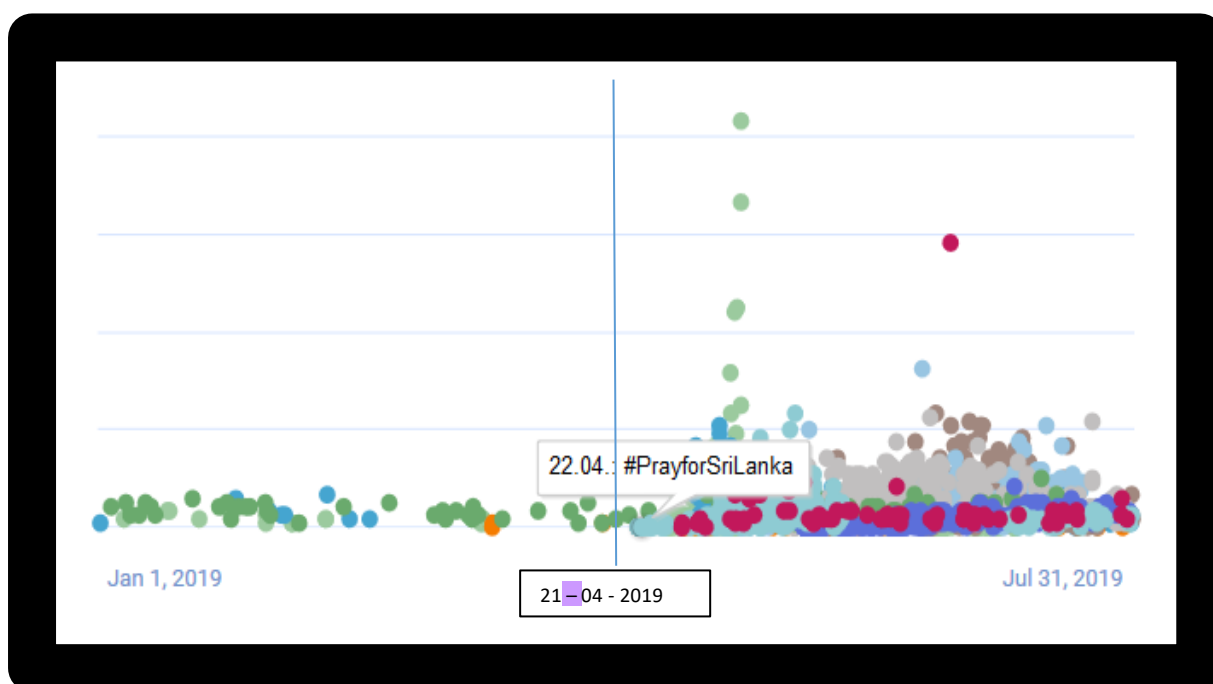
Page	No of posts	No of Reactions	No of Comments	No of Shares
CeylonBlood	536	26,956	1,127	49,361
Manakkalpitha - මනකල්පිත	70	14,381	561	19,452
Sinhala Lanka Organization	363	39,385	3,354	95,054
Sinhalaya (සිංහලයා)	22	37	10	33
Mama Sinhala. Ey Awulda (මමසිංහල. ඇයිඅවුල්ද?)	88	9,726	261	24,564
මල්වඩමMalwadama	319	117,020	1,879	51,442
Sinhala Paribogika ha welanda sangamaya– (සිංහලපාරිභෝගිකතාවෙලෙදසංගමය)	189	16,295	486	41,140
Sinhala vidwath ekamuthuwa - සිංහලවිද්වත්එකමුතුට	82	6,079	155	5,976
Sinhalayan surakimu–(සිංහලයන්සුරකිමු)	302	4,691	192	7,894
Sinhala Wesiyan - සිංහලේවැසියන්	292	60,086	7,032	42,917

The below table shows the peoples' behavior for posts of above Facebook pages during the period of 01st of January 2019 to 31st of July 2019.

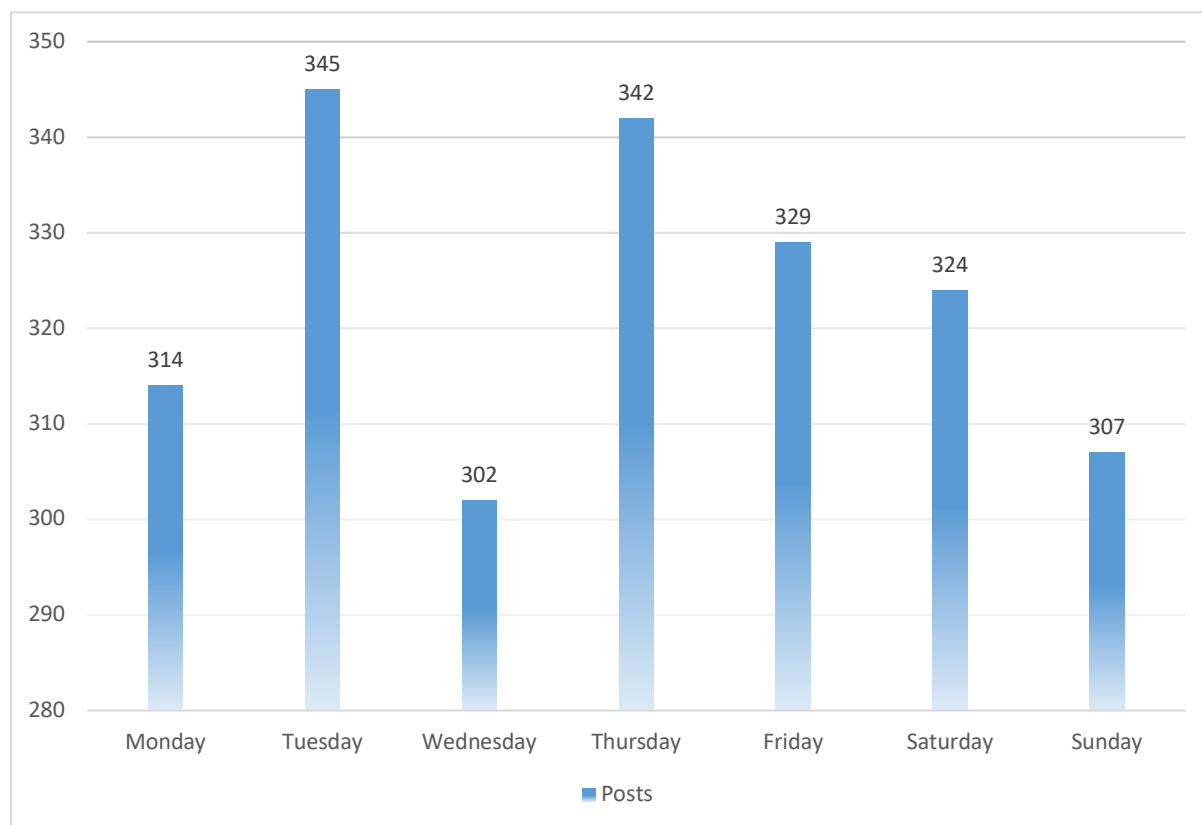
Page	Total Reactions	No of likes	No of Love	No of Wow	No of Haha	No of Sad	No of Angry
CeylonBlood	26,956	21,037	1,380	204	1,708	710	1,917
Manakkalpitha - මනකල්පිත	14,381	9,503	3,051	1,439	265	36	87
Sinhala Lanka Organization	39,385	31,476	2,024	406	1,139	2,229	2,111
Sinhalaya (සිංහලයා)	37	34	2	0	1	0	0
Mama Sinhala. Ey Awulda (මමසිංහල. ඇයිඅවුල්ද?)	9,726	7,814	326	44	582	532	428
මල්වඩමMalwadama	117,020	109,618	4,736	480	1,157	742	287
Sinhala Paribogika ha welanda sangamaya– (සිංහලපාරිභෝගිකතාවෙලෙදසංගමය)	16,295	13,673	722	89	186	1,110	515

Sinhala vidwath ekamuthuwa සිංහලවිද්වත්එකමුතු	-	6,079	5,242	206	37	14	310	270
Sinhalayan surakimu- (සිංහලයන්සුරකිම)	-	4,691	3,974	80	18	148	214	257
Sinhala Wesiyana සිංහලවෙසියන්	-	60,086	50,925	8,476	238	181	232	34

It can be clearly noted that the above pages actively working soon after the Easter bomb attack on 21st Sunday, 2019. The below graph illustrates the reactions of people for posts of the above pages with the timeline of before and after the 21st April 2019.



The below graph illustrates the day-wise breakdown of posts during the period of 01st January 2019 to 31st July 2019.



There are only a limited number of social media networks that promote peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka when compared to hate provoking sites. Most of the organizations/individuals who promote peace and reconciliation in-ground are not active on social media networks. The following pages listed below are the active social media networks that promote peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

1. Sri Lanka Unites

<https://www.facebook.com/srilankaunites.org/>
19,245 people like this

2. Rise Up Sri Lanka

<https://www.facebook.com/RiseUpSL/>
11,255 people like this

3. Hashtag Generation

<https://www.facebook.com/hashtaggenerations/>
8,391 people like this

4. Interfaith Colombo

<https://www.facebook.com/Interfaithcolombo/>
1,535 people like this

5. International Youth Alliance for Peace

<https://www.facebook.com/IYAP.org/>
12,239 people like this

6. Sarvodaya

<https://www.facebook.com/SarvodayaSriLanka/>

14,760 people like this

7. Minor Matters

<https://www.facebook.com/MinorMatters.org/>

703 people like this

8. National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

<https://www.facebook.com/npcs/>

2,887 people like this

9. Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka

<https://www.facebook.com/SFCGSriLanka>

7,238 people like this

10. Youth for Sri Lanka

<https://www.facebook.com/youthforsrilanka.lk/>

1,195 people like this

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

Most hate provoking sites target the young generation. The gullible youth are prone to share the post across a wider group of people, especially within their network and identified to the same vulnerable age group without considering the repercussions. The posts are shared on Facebook and WhatsApp groups which are private and or closed in nature. The impact of sharing and spreading of contents carrying hate speech is more than what is seen to the naked eye and disruptive and destructive as a whole.

Most of the hate speech consists of images or keywords aimed to attract the attention of viewers and readers. Designers of hate speech use Sinhala or Tamil words coupled with English words. Some posts seem nonviolent and no hate is seen on the face of it. When it is analyzed with the understanding and is interpolated to the local context, the result is that the posts endorse or promote violence and hate. There is a challenge in identifying hate speech and it is observed that people who are designing hate speech and pages change their designs, styles and other identifiable criteria to avoid being detected and reported. Hate speech through closed groups such as WhatsApp will not be subject to being monitored unless there is a special mechanism.

It was noted that hate speech is designed to address three fundamental elements.

1. Insecurity – most of the posts highlight a hidden gorilla. The population of the minority community is growing rapidly and the majority community is faced with a perceived threat of becoming the minority in the future.
2. Economy–posts indicate that the minority community has a strong influence and control on the ruling party and they are offered privileges more than the majority. People who are struggling for a day to day living feel that the reason for their struggle is a result of the minority as they control business and economic activities.
3. Emotions–hate posts manipulate emotions and condition behavior by using slogans such as "unless we protect our community, no one will protect us" and such posts contain images of power, braveness, motherland, heroes.

These three reasons are more appealing to the emotions and the vulnerability of people. The younger demographics can easily be swayed as they have not been exposed to critical thinking either by exposure or education. The number of hate speech and posts drastically increased just after the Easter bomb attack when tension was high and emotions affected rational thinking. This was a vulnerable moment comparing to the global trends and in the context of human behavior and the psychological reaction. It was a time that crooked thinking could easily change the mindset.

Sri Lanka has adequate laws in place to act upon hate speech and the issue is recognized by many activists is the inaction and hesitancy of law enforcement authorities to act. It is evident that ICCPR and other provisions of laws are not prudently used by law enforcement authorities while the political will to enforce such laws is in question. It has however been noted as cited in the findings that the ICCPR has been used selectively and or with an emotional bias. However, it would be good to have a social media monitoring and regulatory mechanism in place to have proper solutions. When the government seeks to regulate what individuals say

on social media platforms, basic freedoms can often be trampled. In countries that lack the rule of law, well-intended regulations can be used against political opponents or to suppress dissent. Any attempt at social media regulation needs the widest possible public discussion. Such debates need to be based on empirical data and social science research and not driven by rhetoric or anecdotal evidence.

Various studies and reports used different age groups to identify youth depending on the context and nature of the study.

The involvement of youth in promoting peace through social media is minimum compared to the hate speech propaganda. The organizations currently working in promoting peace through social media are doing a pleasing job. Moreover, it was noted that there is a lack of coordinated effort of organizations/groups working in promoting peace.

It was noted that there are two views of countering hate speech.

1. Use of facts, figures, logic to design peace-promoting messages countering hate speech
2. Use of imagery messages and design the messages with what is more appealing to the younger generation which has more impact and will spread fast as hate spreads.

6.2. Recommendations

When promoting peace through social media, it would be effective to use the strategies, of using images as well as facts, figures, and statistics. This has to done to be effective in the distribution of such messages through various platforms of social media, especially Facebook. A few important strategies are listed below to make it effective in the dissemination of useful and effective communication.

- (a) Use of attention-drawing contents and or headings including keywords.
- (b) It should be easy to download and less fussy.
- (c) Connect with general messages—such as good morning messages, birthday wishes, and make such sites accessible for free downloading capacity
- (d) Use of events, incidents, sports, achievements to promote peace through participation.
- (e) Use of comedy, caricature, cartoon images
- (f) Use strategies to have a viral effect on distribution
- (g) Use of popular figures and opinion leaders

It is important that the message needs to be simple and attractive for anyone to understand at a glance. People, especially the youth should be able to read and re-share the message while on the move.

It is recommended to be dynamic but interactive in promoting peace messages after violent incidents and counter hate provoking messages. The messages should be focused and novel to draw attention and be empathetic.

It would be an asset to have a trained team of youth working in promoting peace through social media. The concept of peace and reconciliation must be part of the curricular from the formative years to achieve harmony through the youth. It is important that the youth teams

be empowered to understand and recognize the country context, political structure, conflict while peace takes a key spot. The trained team should keep a continuous monitoring especially during times of violence to act fast. It is recommended to identify youth as age group between 18-30 for this purpose.

It is an important factor to consider that the peace-promoting group and pages should not carry the tag of NGO or funded project. The key to success is to build confidence to believe what is being said and that the source is reliable and accepted. The message should seem as a countering message is from a normal person of same age, who has no agendas to ensure reliability.

It is recommended to partner with a government entity with similar objectives, such as youth or peace and reconciliation. E.g. National Youth Center, Office for National Unity and Reconciliation. Likewise, it is effective to work with other non-government peace-promoting institutions and establish a coordinated effort and share resources among such organizations to be more effective and establish a sustainable effect in promoting peace in social media.

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