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OCCASIONAL PAPER 2

# DIGITALISATION, ONLINE ACTIVISM AND CIVIC POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

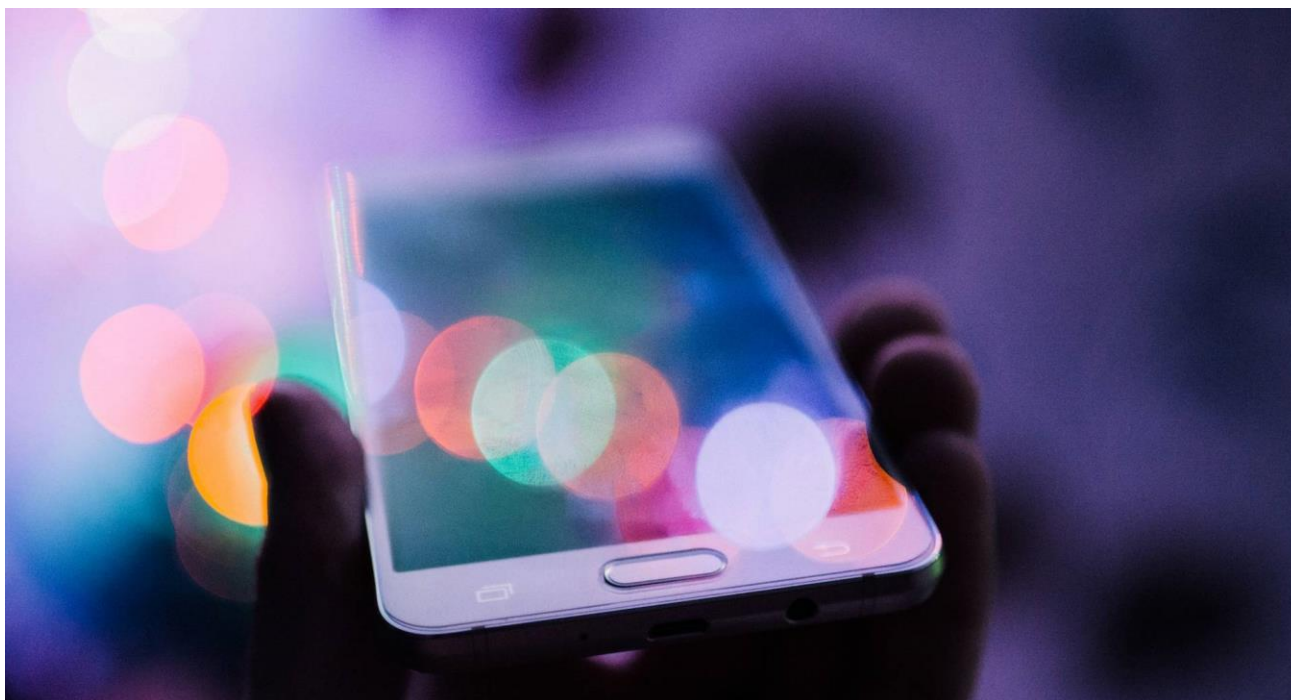
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE INCREASE IN INTERNET USAGE IN BANGLADESH, PARTICULARLY WITH INTERACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, HAS CREATED A NEW LANDSCAPE FOR ALTERNATIVE CIVIC POLITICS: A NON-ÉLITE CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN EVERYDAY POLITICS AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM. YOUTH PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL PROTESTS AND MOBILISATION, INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE ACTIONS AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL REMAIN CRUCIAL TO CAPTURE SUCH NON-ÉLITE CIVIC POLITICS IN THE AGE OF INTERNET. THE PAPER HIGHLIGHTS SOME SUCH 'LOCAL' PRACTICES OF INTERNET BY ORDINARY USERS AGAINST THE META-NARRATIVES OF DIGITAL POLITICS IN BANGLADESH.



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## INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the internet, social media also made its place in the political ecosystem of Bangladesh. It gave people a platform to communicate their grievances and concerns, as well as voice their opinion on the current government and its policies, leading to a new kind of participatory politics and making the political space more dynamic than before. A large number of Bangladeshis are active users of social media, which creates digital cultures inclusive of activism, development, access, empowerment, control, contestations, and everydayness. This new cultural landscape has enabled an alternative public space for civic engagement and political participation but a rising matter of concern has been the controlled nature of digital space. For instance, the Digital Security Act 2018 (DSA), recently renewed as Cyber Security Act 2023 (CSA), has been accused of being a means of controlling digital space and muzzling freedom of expression.<sup>1</sup>

This Working Paper focuses on the rise of ordinary participatory politics and the creation of a non-élite civic space in the wake of online activism in the digital age. Discussions on digital media mostly revolve around three perspectives: first, a media-centric or platform-centric approach; second, the techno-centric approach that deals with big data, AI and innovations; and third, influences and implications where virality, hate and

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<sup>1</sup> J. Rafah, 'A Case Against the Digital Security Act 2018', *The Daily Star*, 7 April 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/case-against-the-digital-security-act-2018-3291166>, and 'Parliament Passes Cyber Security Bill 2023', *Dhaka Tribune*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/325228/parliament-passes-cyber-security-bill-2023> (both accessed on 7 November 2023).

extreme speech online or market, development and mobilisations are examined.<sup>2</sup> Moving away from any of this singular approach, this study relies on a practice framework that seeks to capture the lifeworld and everydayness of digital media. It begins with a simple but imperative question: what do people do with social media as individuals and as a community? Taking into consideration the practices and various layers of activism online, I argue for an alternative civic participation that has social and political significance where the ‘civic’ may not be a formalised, organised, mobilised populace necessarily located in the urban, closer-to-the-centre and policy circles, and acknowledged in the mainstream polity. Rather, I attempt to understand this civic with non-élite, urban or non-urban, activists and non-activists, online participation of ordinary people that is creative and critical of their socio-political system.

Nick Couldry (2004) outlined practice theory to understand media as ‘embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life’ and engage with questions of power and complex mediated practices.<sup>3</sup> The practice framework was followed to explore the realm of everydayness of the users; it also helped in outlining the interactive nature of digital cultures that is underpinned with policies, politics, publics and practices. Conceptually, the media practice approach signifies the voice and aspirations of the users by paying attention to the expressions of the ordinary via social networking sites. In the context of Bangladesh, such online civic participation is visible on platforms like Facebook, YouTube and TikTok where the youth articulate their political opinions, individual passions and social concerns through text and visuals.

Social media-led socio-political mobilisations of significant events reveal the love and hate of digital politics in contemporary Bangladesh. From the Shahbag protest in 2013 (which was organised around the 1971 War Crimes Tribunal) to the No VAT movement or the Road Safety protest of 2018, all were socio-politically motivated movements. The intended use of a social media platform and its actual use on the ground always evolves and changes.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Shahbag Protests, the use of Facebook evolved with the requirements of the protestors. Originally intended as a platform to share photographs and short texts of personal updates with family and friends, it was used for something beyond this scope by the protestors in Shahbag. Social media was also used in other movements like the ‘No VAT in Education’ protest in 2015 to spread awareness about the cause of their protest.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Schroeder, ‘Towards a Theory of Digital Media’, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2018, pp. 323–39; N. K. Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012; S. A. Castaño-Pulgarín, N. Suárez-Betancur, L. M. T. Vega & H. M. H. López, ‘Internet, Social Media and Online Hate Speech: Systematic Review’, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 58, no. 6: 101608, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101608> (accessed 7 November 2023); P. Kalantzis-Cope & K. Gherab-Martín, *Emerging Digital Spaces in Contemporary Society: Properties of Technology*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> N. Couldry, ‘Theorising Media as Practice’, *Social Semiotics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2004, 115–32.

<sup>4</sup> R. K. Roy, ‘Online Activism, Social Movements and Mediated Politics in Contemporary Bangladesh’, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 193–215; and R. K. Roy, *Television in Bangladesh: News and Audiences*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2020.

The essay is organised in three sections: the first section provides a background and brief overview of digitalisation in Bangladesh including its politics and policy; the second section focuses on the participatory politics of online activism; and the third section employs a microscopic lens to draw on some empirical instances and cases of ordinary practices of digital. The Conclusion outlines the nature and scope of non-élite civic space in the new age of internet.

## DIGITALISATION IN BANGLADESH: PROSPECTS AND PARADOXES

Digitalisation in Bangladesh has evolved rapidly since the initiation of the ‘Digital Bangladesh’ program in 2009. The project aimed to make the country a technology-driven society, focusing on e-governance, online education and digital healthcare; the ‘A2I ([Aspire to Innovate](#)) Programme’, along with several other specialised committees and taskforces, was established strategic planning to oversee this transition. The core of the strategic plan involved establishing sector-specific objectives and creating an environment to successfully achieve the goals of Digital Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> The government planned to use ICTs to reduce poverty, engender best practices and good governance, establish social equity (through quality education), develop public healthcare facilities, effective law enforcement, and address challenges from climate emergency.<sup>6</sup>

The Digital Bangladesh initiative has led to significant growth in mobile and internet use across the country, in both rural and urban areas.<sup>7</sup> Parallel to this, civic participation in politics and political/social activism in Bangladesh is undergoing a digital transformation. Traditionally reliant on offline techniques like community meetings and voting, civic voices are now spreading to online platforms. Government-run portals for public services, mobile apps for reporting civic issues, and social media channels are emerging as the new tools for citizen involvement. In short, the digitalisation drive in Bangladesh is changing how civic politics operates by offering new, wider, mass platforms for engagement.

As per their [2008 Election Manifesto](#), the ruling Awami League government promised to transform the country into a ‘digital Bangladesh’ which, they now claim, has been delivered.<sup>8</sup> However, there are various

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<sup>5</sup> S. Hasan, ‘ICT Policies and their Role in Governance: The Case of Bangladesh’, *Science, Technology and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2014, pp. 363–81.

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Karim, ‘Digital Bangladesh for Good Governance’, *Bangladesh Development Forum*, Dhaka, February 2010, [https://erd.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/erd.portal.gov.bd/page/60daef34\\_a889\\_4a94\\_a902\\_f3a4a106762b/BDF2010\\_Session%20VI%20\(1\).pdf](https://erd.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/erd.portal.gov.bd/page/60daef34_a889_4a94_a902_f3a4a106762b/BDF2010_Session%20VI%20(1).pdf) (accessed on 7 November 2023).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Internet users in Bangladesh Double in Last Five Years’, *The Financial Express*, 16 October 2020, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/ecnec-okays-tk-6140b-for-upgrading-bhanga-benapole-highway-4-lane-project> (accessed on 9 November 2023), and ‘BBS: 39% of Bangladeshis use Internet, 31% own Smartphone’, *Dhaka Tribune*, 29 December 2022, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/301591/bbs-39%25-of-bangladeshis-use-internet-31%25-own> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Bangladesh Awami League, *Digital Bangladesh - Vision 2021: The Secret of Bangladesh’s Transformation*, n.d., <https://www.albd.org/articles/news/35867/Digital-Bangladesh---Vision-2021:%0D%0AThe-Secret-of-Bangladesh%E2%80%99s-Transformation> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

undercurrents to such a claim as one examines the ground reality of the grand vision of 'digital Bangladesh'. The four pillars of the program, as identified are

- Human Resource Development
- Connecting Citizens
- Digital Government
- IT Promotion<sup>9</sup>

These pillars also hint at the integration of technology in every aspect of the day-to-day transactions of a citizen.

With increasing use of digital services, the policies around it have also started to evolve. Initially, the country regulated the internet through the Penal Code of 1860.<sup>10</sup> This changed after the enactment of the Information & Communication Technology Act 2006 (2013), which was introduced with the aim of regulating cyber-crimes and e-commerce disputes. The Act deals with activities like fake electronic publishing, hacking of electronic devices and computer-related offenses.<sup>11</sup> However, despite the intended uses, it has widely been used to suppress freedom of speech and expression. Critics have noted the misuse of provisions under Section 57 of the Act which underlines any act of publishing or transmitting a punishable offence if that is found prejudicial against a person or the state or hurting religious belief or deteriorates law and order.<sup>12</sup> The Act was originally enacted in November 2006 by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party when it was in power, and amended in 2013 by the government of the Awami League.<sup>13</sup> The 2013 amendments are said to have made the law stricter and more stringent.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ICT Division, *Annual Report 2018–19*, Dhaka: The Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology, Government of Bangladesh, 2019, [https://ictd.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/ictd.portal.gov.bd/annual\\_reports/8788ab2e\\_23e5\\_4eb8\\_8411\\_768d8bc232a2/Annual%20Publication%202018-2019.pdf](https://ictd.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/ictd.portal.gov.bd/annual_reports/8788ab2e_23e5_4eb8_8411_768d8bc232a2/Annual%20Publication%202018-2019.pdf) (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>10</sup> T. Remura, 20 October 2019, <https://tahmidurrahman.com/cyber-law-of-bangladesh-internet-law-web-ict-act-rules-regulations-punishment-and-rights-in-bangladesh/#:~:text=In%20Bangladesh%2C%20the%20ICT%20Act,computer%20technology%20or%20cyber%20crime> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Bangladesh National Parliament, October 2006, <https://samsn.ifj.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Bangladesh-ICT-Act-2006.pdf> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>12</sup> S. Liton, 25 July 2018, <https://ipi.media/ipinetwork/bangladesh-abuse-of-cyber-law-finds-no-limit/> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>13</sup> J. Barua, 'Amended Information Technology and Communication Act', *The Daily Star*, 1 January 2014, <https://www.thedailystar.net/amended-information-technology-and-communication-act-4688> (accessed 9 November 2023).

<sup>14</sup> G. M. Rahman, 'Resolving the Issue of Section 57 in ICT Act', *New Age*, 9 September 2017, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/23595/resolving-the-issue-of-section-57-in-ict-act> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

Following the amendments to the law, the police gained the authority to arrest citizens without warrants; soon, in fact in 2017 alone, there were a number of cases filed against journalists under the provisions of the Act,<sup>15</sup> as outlined in a report brought out by Human Rights Watch titled *No Place for Criticism: Bangladesh Crackdown on Social Media Commentary* (2018). It reported the arrest of Monirul Islam, a rubber plantation worker in Srimangal in southern Bangladesh on 13 April 2017 for allegedly liking and sharing a Facebook post by someone else relating to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India. According to the (amended) law, such actions (like commenting and liking posts on Facebook) were deemed to be offences. The accused were booked under the non-bailable section of the Act, with the prison sentence associated with the crime being extended from 10 to 14 years.

Government policies relating to 'Digital Bangladesh' have been criticised for being 'scattered and incomprehensive', and the government's commitment to ensuring freedom of mass media and freedom of information ambiguous.<sup>16</sup> The strategy outlined initiatives to improve ICT access, but it was unclear how such a strategy would be implemented. Moreover, the National ICT Policy (2009) prioritised infrastructure development nationwide but overlooked socio-economic contexts of marginalised communities. There were no clear strategies to increase people's social, cultural, political and civic involvement in the policy.<sup>17</sup>

Large-scale e-infrastructures like the Internet elicit a sense of hope and optimism among the general public. However, instead of embodying such images, these systems often function in accordance with the power of political parties. The government of Bangladesh has promoted the internet as a tool for development in Bangladesh, but when confronted with perceived threats to national security, the government's promise of enhanced internet access was jeopardised. The interests of the political powers eclipsed ordinary people's need for the internet.<sup>18</sup>

This situation was further aggravated with the introduction of the Digital Security Act, 2018 (DSA) which involved digital crime identification, prevention, suppression, prosecution, and trial, among other things. For 'any kind of propaganda or campaign against Liberation War, spirit of Liberation War, Father of the Nation, National Anthem or National Flag', the law enforced a 10-year imprisonment, and doing it a second time or

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<sup>15</sup> T. S. Adhikary, *The Daily Star*, 7 July 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/bangladesh-ict-act-the-trap-section-of-57-1429336> (accessed on 7 November 2023).

<sup>16</sup> M. S. Islam & Å. Grönlund, 'Digital Bangladesh – A Change We Can Believe In?', *Electronic Government and the Information Systems Perspective: Second International Conference, EGOVIS 2011, Toulouse, France, August 29–September 2, 2011, Proceedings 2*, Berlin: Springer, pp. 107–21.

<sup>17</sup> A. Aziz, 'Digital Inclusion Challenges in Bangladesh: The Case of the National ICT Policy', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2020, pp. 304–19.

<sup>18</sup> M. bin Morshed, M. Dye, S. I. Ahmed & N. Kumar, 'When the Internet Goes Down in Bangladesh', *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer-supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*, February 2017, pp. 1591–1604.



repeatedly would entail imprisonment for life.<sup>19</sup> Since its inception, the DSA has been criticised heavily on the grounds that it inhibits freedom of expression.

According to the Human Rights Watch World Report 2022, the DSA allows the government to harass or imprison journalists, activists and individuals who express criticism towards the government. An infamous DSA case concerns the author and social activist Mushtaq Ahmed who died in prison on 25 February 2020; Ahmed was detained for ten months, and the court denied his bail repeatedly. Social activist and cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was jailed for more than 10 months before being released on bail on 4 March 2021 due to widespread protests and international uproar. He claimed that he was tortured while in detention.<sup>20</sup> As per the Centre for Governance Studies in Dhaka tracker for DSA, over 1,500 cases have been filed by law enforcement authorities against citizens between 2018–21.<sup>21</sup>

Following regular criticism by national and international bodies, the government amended the DSA and created the CSA in 2023. The new law replaces imprisonment with monetary penalties in defamation cases, and the police can no longer arrest anyone for defamation. However, legal experts and human rights groups have continued to express concern about the new law.<sup>22</sup>

## ONLINE ACTIVISM AND YOUTH MOBILISATION

Bangladesh has seen an unprecedented increase in internet usage and user-initiated digital literacy. As a result, platforms like Facebook, YouTube and TikTok have become instrumental in organising grassroots movements and spreading awareness on various social issues.<sup>23</sup> Social media-led socio-political mobilisations can be considered as significant events through which the love and hate of digital politics has been expressed in contemporary Bangladesh. Internet activism paved the way for one of the largest political protests in recent years: the Shahbag Movement (2013) began as an online agitation by activists and bloggers expressing their

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<sup>19</sup> Bangladesh - Digital Security Act, 2018', n.d. <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/upload/act/2023-03-22-11-00-02-87.%E0%A6%A1%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9F%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B2-%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%87%E0%A6%A8,-%E0%A7%A8%E0%A7%A6%E0%A7%A7%E0%A7%AE.pdf> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>20</sup> On this, see 'Cartoonist Kishore, Six Others Indicted in DSA Case', *Dhaka Tribune*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/264575/cartoonist-kishore-six-others-indicted-in-dsa> (accessed on 9 November 2023); and F. Mahmud, 'Bangladeshi Cartoonist Granted Bail after Widespread Protests', 4 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/cartoonist-gets-bail-in-bangladesh-after-widespread-protests> (accessed on 7 November 2023).

<sup>21</sup> A. Riaz, 'How Bangladesh's Digital Security Act Is Creating a Culture of Fear', <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/09/how-bangladesh-s-digital-security-act-is-creating-culture-of-fear-pub-85951> (accessed on 7 November 2023).

<sup>22</sup> 'Cyber Security Act to Replace DSA with No Jail for Defamation', *The Business Standard*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/digital-security-act-be-scrapped-replaced-new-cyber-law-678282> (accessed on 7 November 2023).

<sup>23</sup> W. L. Bennett & A. Segerberg, 'The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalisation of Contentious Politics', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2012, pp. 739–68.

dissatisfaction with a verdict against a ‘war criminal’ of the 1971 War of Liberation. Activists demanded the supreme (death) penalty for the accused for being involved in ‘genocide’ or ‘crimes against humanity’. The Movement takes its name from the Shahbag intersection in Dhaka city, which was occupied by the protesters for weeks and used as a stage to communicate the incidents around the issue. The youth mobilisers, who led and dominated this movement, maximised the use of social networking sites to steer the conversation from their perspective. The blogs successfully deployed the digital space to make an impact in the physical world by inspiring people to join the protests on the ground. This synergy between a socio-political retaliation and the digital ecosystem shows the need to delve deeper into the role of social media in mobilising society.<sup>24</sup>

The Shahbag Movement, however, is not an example of traditional political activities being replaced by online activism. The Movement marked the changing nature of political participation. After Shahbag, political parties, both student/youth and mainstream groups, started paying more attention to politics online and using their own (largely Facebook) accounts.<sup>25</sup>

The ‘intended’ versus ‘actual’ use of social media platforms on the ground always evolves and changes. Other movements like ‘No VAT on Education’ in 2015 used social media to spread the word about their causes;<sup>26</sup> it became a space of congregation for the protestors to discuss their ideas. As avid social media users, youngsters recognised the importance of the digital domain in helping them garner support. But the role of social media, in fact, goes beyond just mediating between the potential audience of a protest and the organisers. It becomes a co-creator of the protest and, in turn, also plays a role in the impact the movement has on society, thus making it a part of the politics of representation of this protest culture. Owing to its power and ability to reach a mass audience, social media in particular holds the power to sensitise people towards politics and the role of power relationships in society. In the process of mediating the movements, it also redefines political culture as bloggers-led youth protests has led other political activists and leaders to also use digital platforms for their activism.<sup>27</sup> In response to the ‘No VAT on Education’ protests, the Government of Bangladesh withdrew the 7.5 percent VAT it had imposed on tuition fees in private universities.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Roy, *Television in Bangladesh*; and idem, ‘Emergence of a “New Public Sphere” in Bangladesh: The Interactive Dynamics between News Television, Citizens and the State’, *Visual Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2020, pp. 65–75.

<sup>25</sup> Roy, ‘Online Activism, Social Movements and Mediated Politics’.

<sup>26</sup> ‘#NoVatOnEducation Student Movement is on the Rise’, *Dhaka Tribune*, 13 September 2015, <https://www.Dhakatribune.Com/Bangladesh/Education/109327/Novatoneducation-Student-Movement-Is-on-the-Rise> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Roy, ‘Online Activism, Social Movements and Mediated Politics’.

<sup>28</sup> ‘“VAT on Education” Withdrawn’, *Prothom Alo*, 15 September 2015, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/Govt-decides-to-withdraw-VAT-on-education> (accessed on 9 November 2023) (accessed on 7 November 2023).



Nearly five years after the Shahbag Movement, the ‘Quota Reform Movement’ — which demanded reforms in the recruitment system of Bangladesh Civil Services — began at the same site in 2018.<sup>29</sup> In the same year, the ‘Road Safety Protest’ also began (after two high school students were run over by a speeding bus). At the time of the ‘Road Safety Protest’, the slogan ‘We Don’t Want Digital Bangladesh, We Want Safe Bangladesh’ was used by the students both on the streets and online to ask the government to prioritise safety over digitalisation<sup>30</sup>. Social media was used widely to disseminate information for the mobilisation and movement of the ‘Road Safety Protest’. However, fake news and misinformation about the protest also began to proliferate on the internet, leading to conflict and violence on ground.<sup>31</sup> The innate quality of social media, known as virality, contributed to street-level mobilisation. Despite expressing distaste for ‘Digital Bangladesh’, activists and protestors were actively using digital platforms to disseminate information about their cause in an effort to garner more support.

### **CIVIC POLITICS: PRACTICES OF NON-ÉLITES**

The rise of social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube has significantly impacted civic politics in Bangladesh, offering ‘civically grounded’ spaces where users can discuss, organise and act on political issues.<sup>32</sup> Individuals often engage in ‘interest-driven’ activities on social media, which may seem non-political but can act politically in aggregation. For example, a hashtag campaign can draw attention to civic issues and drive political action. Politics in the digital age is often subtle and takes on forms different than traditional political activism. This can include liking, sharing or commenting on political content, which can collectively have a large impact.<sup>33</sup>

Jorn Clarke identified the role of ordinary people in defining popular participation and politics, arguing that ordinary people may potentially add value to the process of governing due to their distinct quality, aspirations and desire of summoning by the governing authorities and mainstream political actors. According to Clarke,

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<sup>29</sup> See T. Mahmud, ‘Protests for Quota Reform: Everything You Need to Know’, *Dhaka Tribune*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/feature/142836/protests-for-quota-reform-everything-you-need-to> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>30</sup> See S. S. Panzerree, ‘YOUTH MOVEMENT FOR ROAD SAFETY: Students Speaking Truth to Power’, *New Age*, 5 August 2018, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/47635/youth-movement-for-road-safety-students-speaking-truth-to-power> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>31</sup> M. H. Alam, ‘Road Safety Movement, Social Media and Our Lessons’, *Daily Observer*, 14 August 2018, <https://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=153378>; and ‘Spreading Rumour: Online News Portal Official, 2 Students Detained’, *The Daily Star*, 9 August 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/student-arrested-in-bogra-spreading-rumour-on-social-media-over-student-protest-for-road-safety-demand-1618153> (both accessed on 9 November 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Bennett & Segerberg, ‘Logic of Connective Action’.

<sup>33</sup> Z. Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

the ordinary people and their political participation are quite ambiguous in nature as they act in unpredictable ways against the politico-technocratic demands during the critical socio-political turns.<sup>34</sup>

### ONLINE ACTIVISM AT THE MARGINS

A variety of factors motivate individuals to partake in online activism. Md Al Amin, originally from Shariyatpur district in Bangladesh, is a tea-seller in Dhaka's Poribag (Eskaton) locality. Despite living inside a rickshaw garage on a footpath, he defied expectations by becoming the owner of a YouTube channel where he showcases content shot with a professional camera, just like any other YouTuber. He shared how he mustered the courage to start his channel in 2015–16 when comedy and prank videos were gaining popularity among YouTube users in Bangladesh. He drew inspiration from ordinary individuals who had achieved fame through YouTube and eventually joined TV serials.

Bikas Chakma, who is from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh,<sup>35</sup> started his online journey with uploading videos on social media platforms like YouTube. Growing up, his family members lived in different hills, requiring him to embark on arduous walks to visit them. His frequent travels to various villages inhabited by different tribes like Mro, Tripura and Bom led him to document their unique cultures, cuisine, way of life, traditional attire, and the enduring beauty of the forests. One of his videos showcasing a Chakma marriage went viral on YouTube, giving him the motivation and clarity to become a content creator on social media platforms.

In meme creator Fahim's case, 'gonojagoron moncho' (lit., 'Platform for People's Awakening'), a platform that led the Shahbag Protest of 2013 played a vital role. He stated,

*'I found myself deeply immersed in the contemporary happening of our local politics, which entails almost everything a citizen should worry about. Additionally, motivation only comes when one can relate and is directly connected to social issues, and in my case, I don't associate with any political organization. Therefore, I don't feel biased in making content about it.'*

Md Al Amin said that his personal experience of being criticised and belittled due to his background (as a tea-seller) fueled his creativity to showcase the mistreatment faced by the underprivileged. This became his motivation and inspiration for venturing into YouTube. TikTok influencer Khushbu initially joined TikTok out of curiosity in 2017–18 and used it for entertainment purposes like any other user. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, she started uploading videos following popular trends, and her followers grew rapidly. She said that monetary benefits lured a large number of people to online platforms. While she has not received direct

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<sup>34</sup> J. Clarke, 'In Search of Ordinary People: The Problematic Politics of Popular Participation', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2012, pp. 330–48.

<sup>35</sup> Known as CHT, it is the southeastern part of the country bordering Myanmar to the southeast, the Indian state of Tripura to the north, Mizoram to the east and Chittagong district to the west.

remuneration from TikTok, she knows others who have earned money through their substantial followers and views (of videos).

In a focus group discussion (FGD) held in Naogaon in north Bangladesh with local college students, it became evident that social media enables small business owners to promote their products and reach their target market. Additionally, Facebook's e-commerce capabilities allow individuals to set up online stores directly on the platform, streamlining transactions and providing a convenient shopping experience for customers. One FGD participant, Jesmin Ara, runs a YouTube channel where she uploads videos covering different topics. When asked about her motivation, she explained that there had been no travel vloggers from her locality, and she wanted to be the first. YouTube offers opportunities for fame and financial gain which sparked her interest in starting her own channel. In order to pursue his long-cherished dream of being featured in a newspaper, Shafiqul Islam Shafique, a college student transformed his social media into a magazine-like platform.

Money and fame are generally the biggest reasons why people use social media, but the desire to share information and raise awareness has emerged as a key point as well. Many respondents believe that it is possible to educate the masses about different social phenomena through social media. The number of social media users have been increasing steadily over the past decade, and for many of them, social media platforms are the main source of information.

The pursuit of fame and the desire to raise awareness aligns with the concept of participatory culture. This illustrates the way digital platforms have encouraged people to move from merely consuming media to actively affecting cultural and political debates. Furthermore, this can also signify that individuals strive to gain a certain amount of power in the digital landscape through fame. Some content creators or social media users may leverage their online presence to advocate for social causes and shape political discourse.

Digital platforms have also allowed individuals to exercise their agency and defy the monopoly of mainstream media. Content creators are throwing a big challenge to mainstream narratives by offering alternative discourses and narratives.

## INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND SOLIDARITY

Ashraf Alom, widely known as Hero Alom, is one of the most controversial social media political figures in Bangladesh. He used to sell *chanachur*, a spicy Bangladeshi snack, at a train station. Later, he started selling CDs, and then became a cable TV network provider based in Polibaria village in Bogura in north Bangladesh.

Alom's journey as a social media personality started in 2016. He was always well-known because of his various activities. Gradually, he began sharing his videos on various social platforms, showcasing his talents and creativity. He gained fame and criticism for his unique and distinctive vocal style, often called 'untuned-voiced'

— making him a target for online memes in Bangladesh, and abroad in South Asia.<sup>36</sup> Undeterred, he has amassed over 1.7 million subscribers on his YouTube channel (as of 9 November 2023).<sup>37</sup> Hero Alom continues to engage his audience through his diverse content and contributions to the entertainment industry (through his music videos). Following his fame on the internet, he slowly began to delve into politics. He participated in the 2018 Bangladeshi General Election as an independent candidate (Bogra 4 constituency) and, although he lost the election, his participation drew widespread attention. He contested as an independent candidate in the by-elections later on (for Bogura 6 and Bogura 4), losing the latter by only 834 votes. Significantly, on the day of the election, Alom was assaulted by political opponents, underlining his importance and prominence at the local level.

Alom's rise from ordinary to 'extraordinary', and as a political leader, serves as a source of inspiration to many. He believed that the wide base and influence of social media helped him gain nationwide recognition, which eventually allowed him to become a mainstream politician. As he claimed,

*'[...] the influence of social media is incredibly powerful, as it has reached people worldwide and contributed to my fame.'*

Most of the interview and FGD participants agree on the far-reaching influence of social media in Bangladesh. Sadik is currently studying in a college in northern Bangladesh, having grown up in a village close by; however, in recent years (since 2017), he has been actively posting his (mostly political) opinions on Facebook, which has gained him popularity — he now has more than 6,000 followers. He, in turn, has started following like-minded people and has got associated with many groups and accounts that share and write about the same topics. According to Sadik, on social media, it is acceptable to share thoughts regarding anything.

Social media not only creates interconnectedness among people around the world but also fosters solidarity. Bikas Chakma pointed out that social media enabled people to reach those they could not reach before. He mentioned a woman who was facing numerous challenges related to her basic rights. Once a video was uploaded on social media highlighting her struggles with issues like housing, finances and necessary medical treatment, it went viral and the government took the initiative to provide her with a house. People from far away sent money to support her well-being, while local residents in her neighborhood provided food and essential items. This demonstrates how social media can play a significant role in reducing the suffering of ordinary individuals who would otherwise have most likely remain unheard. It serves as a vital platform to amplify voices and garner support.

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<sup>36</sup> D. N. Pathak & R. K. Roy, 'Challenges and Vision: Visual Politics and a Developmentalist Bangladesh', in S. Singhal & A. Ajay (eds), *South Asian Ways of Seeing: Contemporary Visual Cultures*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2022, pp. 281–304.

<sup>37</sup> Hero Alom, <https://www.youtube.com/@HeroAlomOFFICIALChannel> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

Chakma also emphasised the importance of creating videos depicting such examples and sharing them on social media platforms to raise awareness. He firmly believes that Facebook is the medium that can connect the entire world with those who are left behind. Social media has demonstrated its remarkable power by bringing people together, reminiscent of how radio and TV played pivotal roles during the War of Liberation. It can be seen as an alternative to traditional mass media outlets such as television, newspapers and radio. One notable advantage of social media is its cost-effective and accessible nature, allowing for easy communication and interaction.

Connectedness and solidarity on digital platforms allow individuals to gain social capital, which can foster collective action in participatory digital politics. Raising awareness about different issues makes online activists of content creators who use their platforms to talk about different issues that concern them, and urge collective action.

Ultimately, online participatory politics can have offline implications. Social media has the potential to increase civic engagement and promote participatory politics by giving individuals the tools, information and social capital they need to take part in decision-making and voice their opinion on political matters. This digital space is a new civic sphere where participants can play a role in influencing political decisions. Hardt and Negri (2000) highlighted the significance of such networks, arguing that new forms of networked struggle were emerging, one that relied on self-organisation, communication and innovation, rather than discipline.<sup>38</sup>

The new information technologies have radically transformed older forms of political participation and action, and more flexible and networked forms of political belonging and participation have been enabled in this new age. Transformative politics in the digital age is an outcome of an interactive dynamic between digital activism and social change.

## ONLINE CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Civic participation is often used in studies exploring citizens' role in democratic governance. It involves individual or collective actions aimed at identifying and addressing issues of public concern. It can take various forms, such as voting, attending community meetings, joining civil society organisations and/or using digital platforms to engage in public discourse.<sup>39</sup> According to Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), civic participation involves 'activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action',<sup>40</sup> so, it broadly refers to the

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<sup>38</sup> L. Hjorth, H. A. Horst, A. Galloway & G. Bell, *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> S. Verba, K. L. Schlozman & H. E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

involvement of citizens in shaping their community through various channels, both offline and increasingly online.<sup>41</sup>

In contemporary political landscapes, the digital realm has created what some scholars term 'online political citizens'.<sup>42</sup> These platforms have mainly facilitated the formation of 'nascent elites' — groups or individuals who exert influence through online engagement despite lacking traditional forms of social or political capital.<sup>43</sup> As argued by Dahlgren (2005), the proliferation of digital media has indeed deepened civic participation, providing a voice for those traditionally marginalised in political conversations.<sup>44</sup>

The access to internet at the margins and availability of digital tools and technologies such as social media platforms have contributed to active civic engagement and online politics. The digitalisation of civic politics and the rise of social media activism have transformed how citizens engage with political issues. This transformation includes overtly political activities and interest-driven and subtle forms of political action.

During the FGD, Bikas reiterated his goal to be informative and shed light on the stories of various ethnic minority groups using social media platforms. He currently creates vlogs in Bengali language since it has the highest acceptability among his audience. However, he plans to produce content in English to reach a wider international audience and present the lives of the hill peoples of Bangladesh to the world.

Like Bikas, many others utilise digital space to voice opinions and exercise their civic and political rights. The FGD participants discussed the significant role social media played in the movement led by Mohiuddin Roni against the black-marketeering of railway tickets in 2022.<sup>45</sup> From the outset, Roni (a university student) took to social media, using his Facebook account to spread awareness of his movement. Soon, others who had faced similar challenges joined Roni at Kamalapur railway station, the central station in Dhaka, and the movement quickly spread across all social media platforms, garnering widespread attention. Thanks to the resolute actions of people both virtually and in physical gatherings, Bangladesh Railways was compelled to address the issue. As a result, the train ticket booking process has become more straightforward and hassle-free, with more stable pricing compared to the situation before Roni's protest movement. It is undeniable that

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<sup>41</sup> B. D. Loader, A. Vromen & M. A. Xenos, 'The Networked Young Citizen: Social Media, Political Participation and Civic Engagement', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, pp. 143–50.

<sup>42</sup> M. Bakardjieva, 'Subactivism: Lifeworld and Politics in the Age of the Internet', *The Information Society*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2009, pp. 91–104.

<sup>43</sup> C. R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> P. Dahlgren, 'The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation', *Political Communication*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2005, pp. 147–62; and N. Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> On this, see 'DU's Roni takes Protest Against Railway Mismanagement to Shahbagh', *Dhaka Tribune*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/274686/du%E2%80%99s-roni-takes-protest-against-railway>; and 'A Small Victory for a Solo Protest', *The Daily Star*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/small-victory-solo-protest-3075701> (both accessed on 9 November 2023).



social media played a vital role in propelling this change within the history of Bangladesh Railways. The swift dissemination of information through social media channels prompted electronic media and relevant authorities to respond promptly, thus bringing about a transformative change.

Sadik (a social media content creator) said that his main reason for creating content by writing posts was simply out of moral compulsion because he feels that people of his area must know the in-depth strategy behind every social, economic and political crisis:

*'I do not know how far I can reach, but seeing comments under my posts makes me feel that as a social being, I have a certain responsibility to be aware and make people concerned about the ongoing scarcity.'*

Sadik also mentioned that his short video-reel about food adulteration caught the attention of a consumer rights association which commented on his post. This interaction likely helped to amplify the message and draw attention to the issue, indicating that the authorities took notice of the problem and took steps to address it.

Shafique uses social media platforms to express his views on reported news or issues (national or international). He discusses moral devaluation like adultery, theft, domestic violence and other social issues he observes in his locality. When talking about the impact of his work, Shafique said:

*'There was a particular incident where someone from the Land office [Office for Registration of Landed Property] attempted to bribe me. Prompted by this encounter, I decided to record videos whenever I encountered similar situations. As word spread about my actions, the people in the surrounding area also became hesitant to offer bribes, leading to a noticeable decrease in immoral activities.'*

To amplify his messages further, Shafique utilised the 'Inshot' mobile app to edit the recorded videos and add voice-overs. These videos gained traction in Hobigonj and Maulovibazar (localities), creating a reputation that the act of capturing such scenes on video could effectively deter individuals from engaging in corrupt practices. Shafique said that although his influence may be limited to a limited area, he takes pride in fostering a culture where video-recording is a deterrent against bribery.

Over the years, social media has been utilised to attract donors and improve the lives of others. After witnessing the tragic deaths of almost 10–12 people due to diseases like diarrhoea and malaria in Thanchi (near the border with Myanmar), Uthwai Voicer contacted foreign donors he met on social media and raised money to purchase medicines to provide relief in the area. Even in remote areas with no cellular network coverage, where people face significant challenges, their suffering has become visible to the world because of social media. This visibility has enabled Uthwai to share their stories and raise awareness, ultimately generating support. While individuals living in cities can easily dial emergency services like 999 and reach a

hospital quickly, Uthwai ensures that the stories of people in remote areas like Thanchi are heard. These individuals often face a daunting journey of 2–3 nights to reach Thanchi Bazaar for medical assistance, and their lack of network connectivity puts them at a further disadvantage. His content not only helps these individuals but also allows them to receive minimal support from others. Moreover, Uthwai strongly wants to raise awareness about the potential of earning and uploading better content on Facebook. To achieve this, he plans to organise a month-long workshop, conducted virtually, to empower young individuals and encourage them to become content creators.

In the FGD conducted in Naogaon, when discussing the sharing political and social issues on social media, most participants felt negatively due to recent political instability. They perceived the idea as ‘risky’ despite it curtailing their freedom of expression; participants were aware of their rights but often refrained from speaking the truth due to fear of consequences.

Thus, although social media empowers individuals to raise their voices and bring important issues to the world’s attention, political and social pressures hinder their ability to utilise it to its full potential. Nonetheless, it remains a powerful tool for reaching people, raising awareness, organising physical protests, and gaining exposure through global media outlets when local media falls short.

## **CONTROL, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES**

Online participation and practices make users vulnerable to multifaceted challenges, difficulties and mechanisms of state control. The implication of DSA is an important concern raised by participants from smaller places during the FGD and interviews. While many of them believe that regulations such as DSA might be crucial for curbing cybercrime and spread of fake news, the scope of misusing the law for restricting free speech remains a critical concern. One of the respondents, Sadik, recalled how cartoonist Kishore and journalist Mushtaq were arrested and sent to prison without trial for expressing their views and ideas online.<sup>46</sup> Such incidents create fear and anxiety among people and curtail their freedom of expression through self-censorship. But many such individuals, burdened by social anxiety and a fear of reprisal or detainment, also contribute quietly to discussions through subtle reactions. According to Sadiq:

*‘Although my personal freedom on social media remains unviolated, the unjust treatment and illegal torment inflicted upon people have created an atmosphere of apprehension, significantly impacting my behaviour on social media.’*

Fahim believes the DSA has failed to achieve its intended outcome. He gave the example of a journalist, Kajol, who was arrested under the DSA for his anti-government writings. Before his arrest, neither Fahim nor anyone

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<sup>46</sup> On this, see ‘Cartoonist Kishore’; and F. Mahmud, ‘Anger in Bangladesh over Dissident Writer’s Death in Prison’, *Al-Jazeera*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/anger-in-bangladesh-over-prominent-writers-death-in-prison> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

he knew of Kajol or his writings, but following the controversial arrest, Kajol's writing became prominent, and widely read; people who had never heard of him were now interested in reading his pieces. According to Fahim,

*'Whether or not DSA is democratic is another issue. There are numerous debates about the validity or necessity of DSA in a democratic country. Although such law is necessary for eradicating hate speech, digital vandalism, and propaganda, several aspects of the law can pose a threat to freedom of speech.'*

Fahim felt that the DSA made it difficult to express views on national issues on social media. He did not fear the DSA itself, but how it was used to unlawfully punish people. Like Fahim, some other respondents strongly believe that social media has become a highly state-controlled space in Bangladesh. The consequences of the DSA cannot be denied: around 7,000 cases were filed across the country as of 31 January 2023 under the DSA. The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) found that only 2 per cent of those arrested under the DSA came close to appearing in a court, and (of the 1,109 cases studied) 60 per cent were for posts or comments on Facebook.<sup>47</sup> However, it would be incorrect to assume that the implication of DSA to suppress freedom of expression in Bangladesh is inescapable. Thousands of individuals, including some of the respondents, continue to post their thoughts and opinions on social media platforms. Despite the fear of DSA, users have been posting critical social media content, comments and reactions which can, strictly speaking, be deemed as punishable under the law. This active participation on a massive scale should be taken into consideration as an alternative space enabled by online platforms, one that is significantly reshaping traditional forms of politics in Bangladesh.

Control and contestation in the digital age is not limited purely to regulations *per se*, but can also be generated within the networked space that is socially and digitally formed. During field interviews, I noticed that people often have a negative perception about TikTokers. Many complained that TikTokers (especially newly emerging ones) do not pay any heed to social and moral norms while creating content for cheap and quick fame and a following. As Hero Alom claims, he faced insults, mockery and various forms of abuse from people due to his recent activities (including contesting the elections). The trend of negativity continued, and he held the belief that regardless of his performance, there would always be people who will try to bring him down. Despite receiving an abundance of disrespectful comments and 'haha' reactions on social media, he persisted, awaiting the moment when his critics will turn into admirers. Throughout this journey, Alom has maintained a deep respect for the criticisms he has received, even when they were harshly delivered. He used these criticisms as motivation to remain focused, and continually improving himself. Neglected and disliked for 7–8

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<sup>47</sup> 'Cyber Security Act to Replace DSA with No Jail for Defamation', *The Business Standard*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/digital-security-act-be-scrapped-replaced-new-cyber-law-678282> (accessed on 9 November 2023).

years, he steadily grew stronger, eagerly awaiting the time when people would perceive him positively. He said,

*'When it comes to handling criticism, I firmly believe that if I don't address it, it will continue to manifest in a toxic manner. By confronting and overcoming criticism, I demonstrate resilience and prove that it will never hinder me from pursuing my work.'*

Hero Alom's response to criticism is an example of online accountability. It illustrates how individuals respond to criticism and alter their behaviour or content in response to public opinion. Although some respondents view certain social media platforms as unproductive or inappropriate, they nonetheless use social media actively. This highlights a complex relationship between the digital realm and individuals. People may simultaneously critique and engage with social media platforms, which underscores their contradictory behavior towards the digital sphere. Additionally, continued usage of social media platforms represents the existence of digital dependency and digital inclusiveness. Individuals may rely on digital platforms for communication, information, entertainment or civic participation despite holding some negative opinions.

However, the challenges for ordinary users at the ground are manifold. Bikash Chakma said that the main challenge faced in Bandarban (in south-eastern Bangladesh) is its status as a least-developed region in Bangladesh, where access to electricity and the internet is limited compared to the rest of the country. He said that it would take him hours to upload a video, often resulting in frustration when long waits ultimately proved futile. However, since WiFi has become available in Bandarban city (where he has relocated for other reasons), he can now upload videos because of improved connectivity, though operating from his village remains more difficult than ever due to weak internet connectivity.

For many other vloggers and YouTubers, arranging suitable equipment, access to electricity and complexity of social media community guidelines remain major obstacles in their everyday online practices. Nonetheless, users and local-level influencers are utilising their limited resources and devising unique strategies to overcome the numerous difficulties to create quality content. Since it is possible to earn a considerable amount of money, followers and fame on digital platforms, overcoming these obstacles is worth the time and effort. This, in turn, again demonstrates people's willingness towards digital engagement. The internet and digital space itself are not the creators of the new civic sphere; rather, it is the citizens themselves who have created this new space for civic participation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social media practices on the margins provide us with a clue to empowering a considerable number of individuals. The participants in the FGD, or those interviewed, discussed different ways in which they felt empowered because of social media, which is valued as a source of information as well as a medium of

expression. They believe that social media platforms provide an opportunity to voice opinions and exercise agency, despite the controlled nature of the medium, spread of misinformation and the potential to instigate hate speech and violence.

The new mediated spaces created by social media practices of ordinary users and ‘activists’ are often not recognised as ‘stakeholders’ in any change. The space created by the online activism by non-élite users of social media platforms have also enabled participatory networks which can sometimes shape actions. It is a visually vibrant space with memes and imagery representing the thoughts and opinions of ordinary people, and it is politically horizontal with no chain of command. This alternative space is a new civic space where ordinary citizens have truly transcended the traditional hierarchies of power to voice their concerns and reclaim their power as citizens in a democratic structure. Within this digital space, the ‘civic’ is not only civil society but also rural people or the non-élite who use social networking sites to articulate their thoughts.

Mainstream political parties have established cyber cells to connect and communicate with the general public in the digital realm, giving the mass population the opportunity to express their opinions to political leaders directly. In recent years, social media platforms have been utilised by different groups with different political agendas to mobilise protest and gatherings. Some social media-led mobilisations have led to significant social and political changes, turning this into a space where the people are not passive receivers of top-down welfare schemes but are a part of the decision-making process. Thus, the ‘independence and interdependence’ of institutions like political and media organisations is changing. The dominance in setting the agenda, a sort of ‘establishment collusion’ that the political institutions and the mainstream media has maintained for long has been ‘interrupted by grassroots articulations of public interests and values’.<sup>48</sup>

However, the existence of contestation in the digital domain has also fueled conflicts and violence. Both state and non-state entities exert control over the civic space. Communal violence and hate crimes have been instigated on the internet. As a result, the state has introduced laws to regulate the digital space, which in turn has sparked much controversy and discussion. Yet, despite the widespread belief that the DSA or the CSA restricts online activism, digital participatory politics has grown considerably in Bangladesh. Digitisation has been accepted in some way or another by so many overcoming these hurdles.

Political interaction has undergone a multidimensional change via the digital because of various stakeholders being able to participate actively in the discourse which was earlier limited to only the powerful and dominant groups. The social divide that further fuels the digital divide however plays a significant role in the expansion of this sphere of politics. The new form of politics signifies a paradigm shift that cannot be defined by earlier

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<sup>48</sup> S. Coleman & D. Freelon, ‘Introduction: Conceptualising Digital Politics’, in S. Coleman & D. Freelon (eds), *Handbook of Digital Politics*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015, p. 3.

standard political theories or concepts. The civic ownership by ordinary users and youth, and their strategy to use digital media as a tool for mobilisation, production and reproduction, circulation, connective and collective actions and conversation has given rise to a new kind of participatory politics in the age of internet.<sup>49</sup> It is an entirely new phenomenon, particularly in Bangladesh, where a lot of differences and contests happens in the digital space. It is crucial to acknowledge and evaluate this political participation of the non-élite, not least because how this space evolves will determine the future of politics and political participation in Bangladesh.

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<sup>49</sup> E. Soep, *Participatory Politics: Next-Generation Tactics to Remake Public Spheres*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014.





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