

Cyber-Radicalization: A New Breeding Ground for Violent Extremism in Bangladesh?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, people in Bangladesh have faced a new security concern over cyber-radicalization. Due to the increased visibility of law enforcement agents on the ground, Islamist extremists are turning more and more to cyberspace to further their objectives. Despite the growing danger posed by cybercrime, there is insufficient research on cyber-radicalization. So, it is essential that a comprehensive study be carried out to bridge this void of knowledge. The central research question, “How do internet-based social media tools serve as a breeding ground for violent extremism in Bangladesh?” is addressed in the study with empirical data. The research examines how cyber-radicalization affects social stability and personal lives. It also analyzes the difficulties security personnel encounter in combating the growing danger of cybercrime.

A mixed-method approach has been employed to address the research question. The findings revealed that the manipulation of technology, free access to the internet, and the lack of a clearly defined legal framework make it easy for extremists to radicalize cyberspace. The study underlines the urgent need for a thorough, all-encompassing strategy to address the concern.

Keywords: Bangladesh; cyber-radicalization; extremism; internet; social media; Islamists; technology; blogger; violence

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the internet, extremist organizations have used it to propagate their messages, garner political support, and recruit new members. Many extremist groups created static websites in the 1990s to provide access to alternate platforms, get over media censorship, and spread their ideological content. By quickly posting propaganda content that leads to violent conflicts in communities, they were able to radicalize the virtual world with greater ease after the introduction of social media networks and user-generated content in the mid-2000s. The much-talked-about Ramu attack that took place in the Cox's Bazar district in southeast Bangladesh in late 2012 serves as an example in this regard. The event started with a doctored image showing the desecration of the holy Quran that was purposefully uploaded on the Facebook profile of a man named Uttam Kumar Barua by an unnamed person using a pseudonym. After the first event in Ramu, a similar assault on Hindu minority individuals in the Pabna district in November 2013 took place that too had its roots in a Facebook post. Such violence sparked by hate material online has grown more terrifying in the wake of the killing of several secular bloggers in Bangladesh in recent years.

This study explores the ways jihadists deliberately misuse social media to spread violent extremism across the country. It describes the operational goals of Islamic extremists, who are increasingly using the internet for these goals. There is a lack of adequate research by Bangladeshi scholars on the topic. Law enforcement agencies (LEAs) are faced with a variety of dilemmas and difficulties while attempting to combat cybercrime. Therefore, the research highlights significant obstacles to preventing cyber-radicalization. Among them are internet anonymity, remote operations, legal snags, the politicization of cybercrime laws,

that both short-term and long-term actions are required in order to confront the growing threat of cyber-radicalization.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

General objective

To explore how militant groups exploit the internet and social media as breeding grounds for spreading violent extremism in Bangladesh and its effects on general security in the country.

Specific objectives

- To explore both the positive and negative effects of social media on individual lives and social harmony
- To understand the extent of popular appeal for social media
- To comprehend how the internet and social media tools hasten the spread of extremism in cyberspace
- To evaluate the government's measures undertaken to combat cyber-extremism and their effectiveness
- Finally, to enjoy intellectual pleasure by researching and analyzing a practical security phenomenon

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research attempts to answer the following questions with data collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary research question:

How do internet-based social media tools serve as a breeding ground for violent extremism in Bangladesh?

Secondary research questions:

- What effects does the rise of religious extremism in the cyberworld have on people's lives and social stability?
- What challenges do the intelligence agencies and security forces face in dealing with the growing threat of cyber-extremism?

RESEARCH METHODS

To answer the questions posed by the research, a mixed-method approach comprising both qualitative and quantitative analyses was used. Due to the high level of sensitivity of the subject in Bangladesh, there is a lack of publicly accessible data. Writing on militancy and terrorism in Bangladesh has resulted in attacks on several scholars and writers in recent months, and some of them have been killed. To get first-hand information on the subject, a public perception survey was conducted among 75 graduate students in Bangladesh.

A key informant interview was conducted with renowned Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua to understand the legal perspective of cybercrime and loopholes in the existing law. Information was also collected from non-academic sources, such as newspapers. In order to compare the types of incidents caused by radical content on social media and to better understand how extremist groups utilize social media to mobilize individuals to achieve their goals, the research uses a number of case studies. To triangulate and complement the findings that came out of the KII and the survey, a desk-based literature review of publicly

available reports and articles was carried out

LITERATURE REVIEW

McFarlane (2013) warns that the ever-changing face of digital communications and the spread of social networking platforms will continue to challenge LEAs and policymakers in the years to come in all areas of criminality. He identifies anonymity, information manipulation, and linkages between individuals and digital content as all contributing factors to the development of internet radicalization. Bergin et al. (2009) argue that radicalization via interactions online is not, in many cases, the sole determining factor that leads individuals to commit acts of violence for their cause. He goes on to say that physical, in-person interactions and networks are still important in fostering radicalization in the cyberworld. Yet, social media platforms are rapidly flourishing, accelerating the process of online radicalization (Stevens and Neumann, 2009; Nevile-Jone, 2011).

Younas (2014) asserts that radicals' appeal and support have significantly increased as a result of new media. It is evident in the case of *Basherkella*, a Facebook fan page of Islamists in Bangladesh. As of January 2016, the page received over 1.3 million likes, an overwhelmingly large number of likes compared to those of secular pages. He says that though Arabic is the main language used on jihadist social media sites and propaganda material, radicals are now efficient in using several other languages like English, Urdu, Bahasa Indonesia, Turkish, Hindi, and Bengali. Younas (2014) underscores the need for counter-narrative media. He says counter-narrative social media managed by authentic Muslim scholars or Islamic governments are scarce.

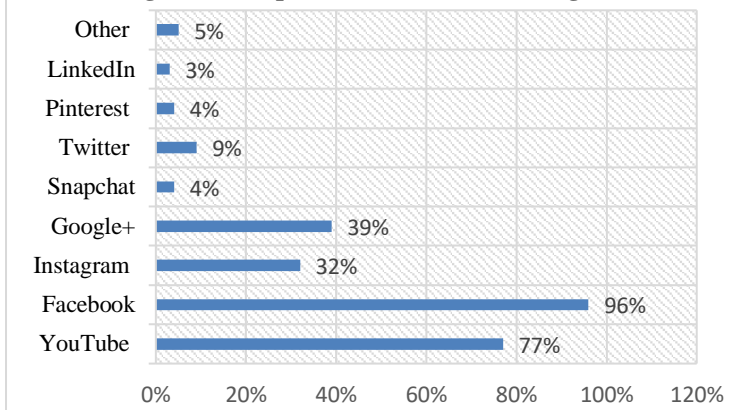
In many countries, including Bangladesh, the state response is to block sites managed by extremist organizations, as hate content posted on those sites is extremely dangerous. The content is categorized as hate material that incites violence. Kennedy and Weimann (2011) do not find blocking effective because extremists' reactions to blocking are immediate and straightforward. If a site is closed, they instantly create a new site. Jenkins (2011) noted in his testimony before the US House of Representatives Committee on December 6, 2011 that "faced with the shutdown of a site, jihadists/radicals merely change the name and move to another site, dragging the authorities concerned into a frustrating game of whack-a-mole and depriving them of intelligence while they look for the new site." Jenkins' statement is true in relation to *Basherkella*, although the administrators who manage the page maintain the same name and insignia as it had in the beginning. The Bangladeshi government blocked the page several times due to their alleged involvement in inciting communal violence. As soon as the government blocked the page, administrators were able to reactivate it and swiftly gained the same number of followers as the page had had before it was shut down.

Social media have both positive and negative effects on people's lives and social interactions. A 2010 report by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs finds social media effective in building interfaith relations. The report argues that social media engages people from diverse communities in interfaith dialogues online, contributing to raising mutual respect as well as tolerance. However, the report discusses only the positive aspects of social media. It is void of an analysis of radicalization through social media. To address the concern over radicalization online, Huda (2015) suggests that policymakers intervene in the education system about technological manipulation and undertake "off-line" initiatives such as interfaith dialogues, workshops on conflict prevention, and reconciliation targeting youths. He analyzes the impact of the misuse of social networks and mainstream media on religious misperceptions and communal violence from a regional perspective with a particular focus on South Asia. However, none of the existing studies highlights how the misuse of new media leads to interfaith clashes in Bangladesh, perhaps because they focus on macro-aspects of cyber-radicalization. In addition, there is a lack of research conducted by Bangladeshi scholars on the topic. The research is therefore aimed at bridging this knowledge gap.

INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN BANGLADESH: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Monthly Computer Jagat, a pioneering technology magazine in Bangladesh, first expressed concerns over the lack of internet access in the country in its July 1996 issue. In an editorial, it stated that “revolutions have been created around the world to use the internet for the extension of knowledge, scientific activities, and education. In Bangladesh, we have no such initiative to provide internet access to educational institutions. Even, top-notch higher education institutions, including the University of Dhaka, and the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, are beyond its reach” (The Monthly Computer Jagat, 1996, p.19). The magazine’s editorial brought the importance of the internet to light for the first time. In late 1995, the government invited applications to subscribe to VAST (Very Small Aperture Terminal) data circuits. The internet was introduced in Bangladesh in June 1996 after a VSAT connection was commissioned. It was first used to publish the results of the 1996 national polls (Maruf, Islam and Bulbul, 2014, p 113).

Figure - 1: Popular social media in Bangladesh

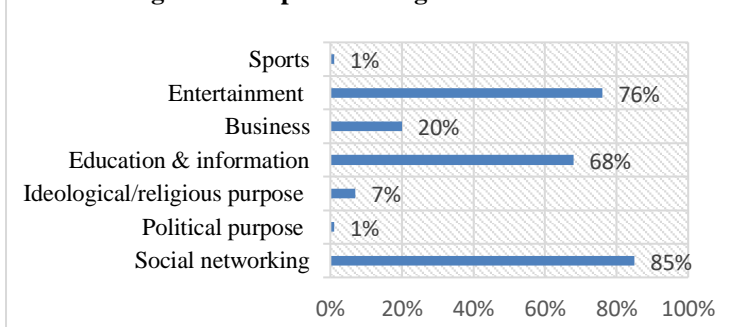


Data source: Survey – 2023

Public interest in the internet increased dramatically after the initial apathy was overcome. As of October 2015, the total number of internet users reached 54.66 million, which is an 18 percent penetration, according to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). According to a report titled “State of Broadband-2015,” published by the UN Broadband Commission, a collaboration of the International Telecommunication Union and UNESCO, Bangladesh ranks 161st out of 189 countries in internet use, with 6.4 percent of the country’s population subscribing to mobile broadband, while Bangladesh’s two big neighbors India and Pakistan rank 155th and 156th respectively (Unesco, 2015). With 1.2 percent of users, Bangladesh stays at the 132nd position on the fixed broadband list, according to the report.

With more people using the internet, the use of social media is constantly growing. Facebook is the most widely used social networking platform in Bangladesh, with about 18 million users. An overwhelming 80% of internet users have Facebook accounts, according to a government report (The Daily Star, 2015a).

Figure 2: Purpose of using social media



Data source: Survey – 2023

Depending on users, social media are used for a variety of purposes. The public perception survey conducted for this study shows that social media are used for social networking by an overwhelming majority (85 percent) of internet customers. The use of social media for entertainment (76 percent) and education/information sharing (68 percent) is also very common. The use of social media varies by gender. A government study reveals that 76.81 percent of social media users are men, and 21.74 percent are women. The remaining 1.45% of users chose not to disclose their gender.

DEFINING CYBER-RADICALIZATION

The term “cyber-radicalization” refers to the use of internet-based social media technologies by extremist groups to spread their radical discourse. To better understand the term, it requires defining. According to Monash Radicalization Project (2012), radicalization is a process via which a person or group can develop the willingness to engage in political violence, including terrorism. Individuals or groups who participate in the radicalization process utilize violence to further their ideological goals. Globalization and the resultant revolution in communication technology have hastened the process by providing new, sophisticated communication networks like Facebook, Twitter, Blog, My Space, Google+, YouTube, Viber, etc. Extremists are increasingly using the tools to reach their ideological goals. Hence, cyber-radicalization is a process, through which an individual is introduced to a belief system that encourages movement from mainstream beliefs toward extreme views, primarily by using modern communications tools (Awareness Brief, 2014, p.1). Zelin (2013) categorizes the development of cyber radicalization into four phases. The first phase started in 1984, when magazines, written essays, and newsletters were the dominant jihadist media tools. The second phase started in the 1990s with the launch of websites owned by individuals linked with Al Qaeda or similar radical groups. The third phase started in the 2000s with the inception of internet-based interactive forums, for example, Global Islamic Media Front, where those who managed the sites were from jihadist groups. And the fourth phase that we are currently experiencing began in 2007 with the worldwide mass popularization of social media networks.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

It is conventionally believed that social media bring about public welfare by making positive changes in society. As the number of users continues to soar, cyberspace is now becoming a vital meeting ground for civically engaged and politically mobilized strata of the society, fostering the emergence of multiple mini-public spheres (Parvez, 2013). Facebook has become a continent of its own, with over 1.39 billion monthly active users as of March 2015 (Awosusi, 2013; Digital Insights, 2014). Google+ has 540 million active users, while Twitter has 288 million. There are a billion active monthly YouTube users (Digital Insights, 2014). The ever-increasing numbers reveal the extent of people’s cyber-engagement.

Some 44 percent of the survey respondents fully agree that social media can influence social movements. And 56 percent of respondents agree partially on this. Responding to a separate question, 78 percent of respondents believe that social media help promote relationships between people of different faiths and cultures. This has become extremely crucial since 9/11. In a 2010 report, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University found that Islamic communities are increasingly using social media to educate others about Islam and challenge anti-Muslim stereotypes that have been prevalent in the West, particularly in the wake of 9/11. Other faith communities, too, are using social networking sites and/or purpose-specific websites to engage people from diverse religious backgrounds in interfaith dialogs. The Tony Blair Faith Foundation serves as an example. The Foundation’s Face-to-Faith program has been designed for schoolchildren of all countries with the express purpose of allowing international interactions via video conferencing, where cross-faith discussions take place. Their objectives also include providing practical support essential to countering religious prejudices, conflicts, and extremism. All Paths Divinity School, and Soliya’s Connect Program seek to strengthen cross-faith relationships by engaging people in

constructive dialogs with the help of the internet.

The ever-expanding social media platforms not only help cross-cultural communications take place in educational spaces in conventional ways, but they also contribute to building socio-political harmony. They facilitate social movement by bringing together people who share a common interest or opinion, creating a sense of affinity among them. This was demonstrated in the Arab Spring and Bangladesh's Shahbagh Uprising. Social media played a significant role in amplifying the events.

Case 1: Social media and the Shahbagh Uprising

People in Bangladesh came together in February 2013 to support the call for the execution of individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity during the 1971 Liberation War. As seen in the Arab Spring, which took place in the Middle East and North Africa in the 2010s as a protest against both corruption and economic stagnation, Bangladeshi youths organized the Shahbagh Uprising. They heavily utilized new media to spread the movement throughout the nation. When the Quader Mollah verdict was released on February 5, 2013, Blogger and Online Activists Network (Boan) launched a series of Facebook events urging people to participate in an offline protest. Thanks to extensive campaigns on Facebook and Twitter, thousands of people gathered at Shahbagh, a key intersection in the capital city of Dhaka. They argued that the International Crimes Tribunal's verdict did not accurately represent the opinions of the public. The demonstrators demanded that Mollah, who had been found guilty of war crimes committed during the nation's 1971 war of independence against Pakistan, be sentenced to death. The campaign on social media soon translated into a nationwide protest. This was the first and biggest social movement to date that was brought on by social media in Bangladesh.

Case 2: Social media and no-VAT-on-education movement

No-VAT-on-Education was the subject of a protest movement carried out by students at private universities in Bangladesh in mid-2015 against a government decision to levy VAT (value-added tax) on their tuition fees. In the draft budget for fiscal years 2015–2016, the finance ministry decided to levy a 10 percent VAT on private university education. Following opposition from the students, the VAT rate was reduced to 7.5 percent. Labeling the government's decision suicidal for higher education for students from middle-class families, students continued to protest, demanding a complete repeal of the tax (The Independent, 2015).

On June 22, 2015, LEAs foiled a procession of students heading towards the ministry building to press home their demands. On August 25, the government announced that it would not withdraw the proposed tax and that students must pay it. The news sparked outrage among students, leading them to organize themselves on Facebook to launch an all-out movement against the decision. They successfully mobilized public opinion in favor of their cause.

On September 9, when police opened fire on a student protest in Dhaka, the outrage escalated. The agitating students carried out road blockades. They organized rallies the following day in major cities to get their demands met. Following a cabinet meeting on September 14, 2015, the proposed VAT on education was eventually withdrawn by the ministry in the face of vehement protests.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

One can view social media platforms as a force for improving people's lives given the expanding opportunities they present. However, issues occur when social media is exploited to foster violent extremism. Some users purposefully generate dread in people's minds and stir up societal instability via technology. According to Sigal (2009, p8), the rapid development of digital communication networks is expected to fuel separatist movements, internal unrest, and religious conflicts. He argues that having more

access to communication technologies has both advantages and disadvantages. For example, social media can be used to promote debate, deepen polarization, and incite racial tensions.

Many criticize social media for promoting hate speech online that incites inter-ethnic violence in nations with high levels of ethno-religious sensitivity. Social media are a tool that extremists use to radicalize people and spread their hatred of other religions. According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Digital Hate and Terrorism Project, which monitors hate groups, as of March 2010, there were 11,500 websites, chat forums, and social media posts that promoted hatred and bigotry (The New York Times, 2010). According to the Center's analysis, there has been a 20 percent increase from the previous year, with platforms like Facebook and YouTube accounting for much of this increase. In South Asian nations, particularly Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, where people's ethno-religious sentiment is extremely sensitive, hate postings quickly get viral. Huda (2015) states that the social impact of ethnic-religious conflicts, hate speech, and inflammatory rhetoric in South Asia reveals an ironic anomaly: while the "borderless world" made possible by electronic media and social networking has played a catalytic role in inciting ethnic, religious, and nationalistic sentiments, the post-1947 demarcation of borders has choked off ancient trade, transport, and human links. Over the past few years, hate propaganda has caused several communal flare-ups in Bangladesh. Islamic terrorists purposefully post hate content on social media platforms to inspire individuals to carry out crimes against religious or racial minorities. The assassination of secular bloggers has become common in recent years. Radical organizations have started to target bloggers, and they frequently use the implausible justification that they are doing this to "protect" Islam. Radical Islamists claim that bloggers are encouraging atheism in the name of freethought, which is detrimental to Islam as a faith. There are deadly repercussions for both social stability and human life from the rapid growth of cyber-extremism. The research findings section of this study offers a thorough discussion in this connection.

Case 3: Ramu attacks and social media linkage

A motley group consisting of leaders from the ruling Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamat-e-Islami, and commoners cracked down on Buddhist people in the Ramu area of Cox's Bazar district on September 29, 2012. A doctored photo showing the desecration of the holy Quran sparked the rioting. Uttam Kumar Barua, a member of the Buddhist minority, was purposefully included in the Facebook photo by an unidentified person using a pseudonym. Barua was a Buddhist by religion and was employed by Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries. This stoked religious rage and inspired individuals from distant locations to launch a wholesale attack on the entire local Buddhist community, including their temples and homes.

The vandals destroyed a 100-ft-tall, under-construction Buddha statue and a 250-year-old monastery (The Daily Star, 2012). Religious scriptures of Buddhism as well as other rare signs of Buddhist heritage were burned within hours. Attacks on the minority community spread to adjacent districts in the following days.

Case 4: Pabna attacks and social media connection

In Santhia of the Pabna district's Bonogram village, an attack targeting the Hindu minority took place on November 2, 2013. Hate speech on Facebook was the primary cause of the violence. Without verifying whether the Facebook post was genuine or not, a group of people started passing out copies of the material. Locals were organized by the mob to carry out sabotage. They damaged 26 homes and claimed that Rajib Saha, a young man from the local Hindu minority community, had posted on Facebook something that was offensive to the Prophet Mohammad (Dhaka Tribune, 2013). Since they were unable to locate Rajib, they managed to seize his father, Babul Saha, who was then taken to a nearby market and brutally beaten. Later, the Daily Star (2013) conducted an inquiry and discovered that Rajib had no connection to the Facebook page, copies of which were used to target Hindus. The administrators of the page themselves posted hate material on the page.

Case 5: Online activism and killing of secular bloggers

Several secular bloggers have been assassinated, and countless more attacked reportedly by Islamist extremists, since the Shahbagh Uprising began in 2013. The attacks have taken place at a time when tensions between secularists and Islamists over war crimes trials mounted across the country. Secularists want Bangladesh to maintain its secularist tradition of separation between religion and the state, while Islamists demand that the country adhere to Islamic rules and customs. Several militant outfits, including the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), claimed responsibility for the attacks on secularists. They “justify” their actions by claiming that bloggers are atheists and enemies of Islam. Table 1 presents a list of secular bloggers assassinated between 2013 and 2015.

Table-1: List of secular bloggers slain between 2013 and 2015

Victim	Identity	Date of assassination	Reasons and justifications used by perpetrators
Ahmed Rajib Haider	Blogger	15 February 2013	Blogging to bring war criminals to book; criticizing Islam
Avijit Roy	Blogger, author, and bioengineer	26 February 2015	Writing against religious fundamentalism
Oyasiqur Rhaman	Blogger	30 March 2015	Anti-Islamic articles
Ananta Bijoy Das	Blogger and author	12 May 2015	Blogging to bring war criminals to book, writing against religious fundamentalism
Niladri Chattopadhyay Niloy alias Niloy Neel	Blogger	7 August 2015	Blogging to promote secularism and freethinking

Data source: Newspaper content analysis

CENTRAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

Social media and cyber-radicalization nexus

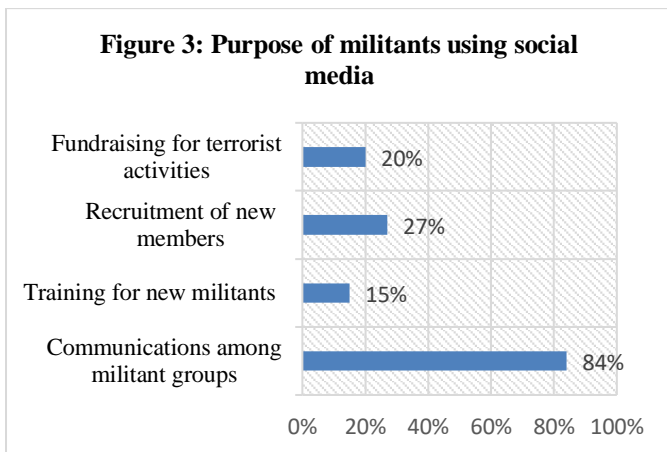
The United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs says the internet has become a virtual echo chamber acting as a radicalization accelerant (Majority and Minority Staff Report, 2008, p. 6). This backs the claim that the internet hastens radicalization by offering a one-stop shop for all the information extremists would need to corroborate their ideas. Some 53 percent of the survey respondents partially agree that the internet hastens the spread of religious fanaticism in countries with high levels of ethno-religious sensitivity. Thirty-one percent of them fully agree with this. Videos and images serve as an alternative to in-person communications and can be powerful sparks for cyber-radicalization. As Stevens and Neumann (2009, p. 12) explain, the internet can be used by extremists to illustrate and reinforce their ideological messages. By using the internet, potential recruits gain access to visually powerful videos and imagery that appear to substantiate the political claims of Islamic extremist groups.

Internet-based social media, which are easily accessible, are also responsible for accelerating radicalization. Monitoring those tools is a challenging task. While mainstream media outlets function in line with a set of specific rules, social media outlets function relatively freely. As a result, extremists can easily manage to radicalize the virtual world by uploading violent hate content. According to Bashir et al. (2014), as social media reduce the need for in-person communication by providing opportunities for virtual communication,

conflicts in societies are less likely to arise, which would otherwise have occurred through direct interactions. The research’s findings, however, refute the claim. Only 29% of those who participated in the survey agreed with the reasoning, with the remaining respondents either supporting it only partially or rejecting it entirely. Between 2013 and 2015, there were numerous instances of communal violence that were brought on by social media. The incidents of Ramu and Pabna, which have been discussed above, describe how hate speech on the internet lead to a large-scale, direct clash.

Militants’ objectives

Radical groups are increasingly resorting to the cyberworld to get their purposes met. In the past, their indoctrination, recruitment, and training hinged primarily on in-person meetings between recruits and recruiters. The internet now provides these connections quickly, easily, remotely, and secretly.



Data source: Survey – 2023

Training and recruitment: Religious extremists use social media for a variety of reasons, such as recruitment, training, and fundraising. There are widespread concerns that the internet facilitates recruitment to carry out terrorist activities. The fear stems from the belief that social media allow individuals to self-radicalize without input or persuasion from others in an offline setting. As seen in the Ramu and Pabna cases, by purposely uploading doctored, religiously sensitive photos, radicals managed to mobilize people to carry out wholesale attacks on minority communities. Extremists generate and publish training manuals online with an aim to teach would-be lone actors or unaffiliated groups how to make bombs and procure weapons. They train new members in how to carry out terrorist attacks. Jihadi websites encourage Muslims to wage war against “*murtads*” (apostates). They function as secondary or tertiary websites that primarily translate content posted on the mother websites of dominant terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

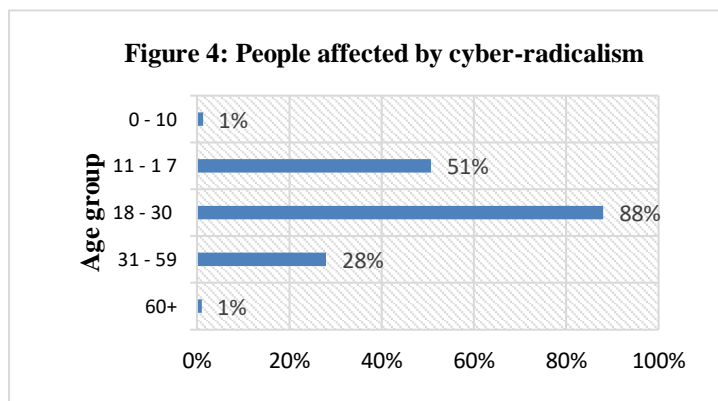
Communication: Extremist groups connect with one another, disseminate propaganda, and gather intelligence through internet-based social media. Since extremist organizations active in different countries are inter-linked, the internet is used for international communications within those organizations; for example, coordinating targeted operations and exchanging operational guidelines. They tailor sophisticated multimedia platforms to reach out to larger audiences, disseminating a wide variety of content appealing to young people while also adapting to the Web 2.0 evolution by utilizing digital platforms that are more interactive (Winn and Zakem, 2009, p. 28).

To spread propaganda, radicals produce manipulated content and offer newsfeed services directly from website to desktop. A common rumor about Islamic leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee is an example of this. A group of Islamic extremists uploaded a photoshopped image of Sayedee on their Facebook page, *Basherkella*, showing his face reflecting off the surface of the moon in 2013. Going viral immediately, the picture

inspired many to protest Sayedee’s trial for his alleged crimes against humanity in 1917 during the Bangladesh Liberation War. The image brought people out of their homes and infused them with jihadi energy, as projected by Islamists, for a countrywide rampage that left half a hundred people dead and countless more critically injured.

Who are the most affected?

People of all ages are affected by cyber-extremism in one way or another. However, young people are especially susceptible to cyber-extremism. With the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, the popularity of social networking sites among users aged 18 to 30 has grown significantly over the past decade (White Paper, 2009, p. 3). Compared to adults, teenagers use social media more frequently. Parents with limited or no knowledge of communication technology find it challenging to monitor their children’s behaviour online as teenagers quickly become accustomed to social media platforms.



Data source: Survey – 2023

The objectives of younger generations utilizing the web or social media are different from those of adults. Youths are more likely to encounter ideological content online than political websites, which they browse through less frequently. As such content is easily accessible online, the internet appears to be extremely important to them. Taking advantage of the internet’s attraction to youths, Islamic extremists manipulate them relatively easily, as they consider them an effective tool to carry out violence against communities belonging to other faiths. As seen in both the Ramu and Pabna cases, youths were held responsible for the devastation done to the Buddhist community by posting hate material on Facebook.

Youths have an innate proclivity to radicalize. Until the rise of social media, opportunities to develop one’s identity mostly occurred in schools, within a family, and among peers through physical contact. The advent of new communication platforms has largely replaced the role of families and schools by providing youths with opportunities to network with their like-minded peers, even beyond national boundaries. Social media contribute to the formation of a virtual community, in which the youth experiment with their identities as well as their ideological commitments. Curiously running across radical content, they seek information on ideologies, traditions, or heritage-related matters associated with radical groups.

Table -2: Popular Islamic and secular social media sites/pages

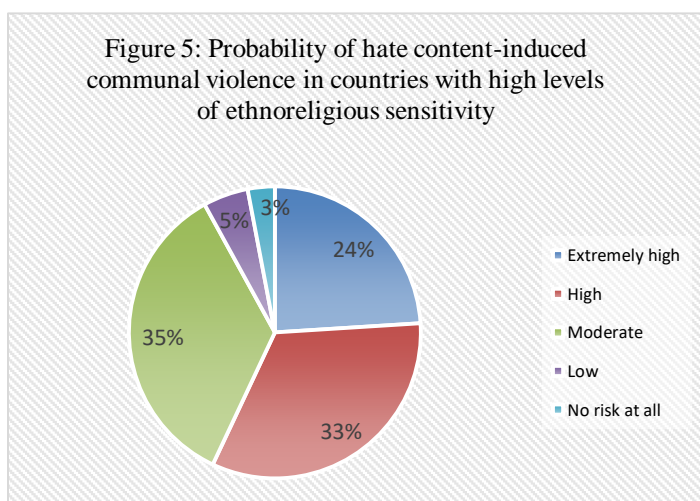
Islamic sites/pages	Secular sites/pages
· BasherKella	· Some where in Blog
· Foraezi Andolon	· Jukti
· Bokhtiarer Ghora	· Nurani Chapa
· Dr Zakir Naik Blog	· Atheist Platform of
· Hadith of the Day	· Bangladesh

· Dr Blilal Phillips Blog ·	· Mukto Mona
· Quran Explorer	· Amar Blog
· Quraner Alo	· Global Secular Humanist Movement
· Ditio Alo	· The Liberal Agenda

Data source: Newspaper content analysis

Social effects of cyber-radicalization

The internet has caused time and space to shrink and borders to disappear, making the world far richer and much smaller. Despite unprecedented technological advancement, the digital divide between the North and South widens at the international level, and the interfaith divide at the social and national levels worsens. The events of 9/11 necessitated an understanding of world religions, as conflicts caused by social media affect the much-needed interfaith coexistence in societies. In developing and underdeveloped countries, social networking tools contribute more to instability than to peace. In countries with high levels of ethno-religious sensitivity, social media are frequently seen triggering communal violence among different sects, accelerating the spread of cyber-radicalism. This causes the prevalent interfaith divide to widen. People in these countries are prone to ethno-religious conflicts. Hate content on social media goes viral immediately, fomenting violent conflicts. This is evident in the Ramu incident. Hate material on the Facebook timeline of a Buddhist man led to a massive act of vandalism against the entire Buddhist minority. The content brandished people’s religious fury, mobilizing them to carry out a blanket attack on the community. The 2013 movement by Islamists that spread all over the country is another example. Days after a secular blogger, Rajib, was assassinated allegedly for writing against Islam, Islamists began to mobilize public sentiments against “atheist bloggers,” disseminating the message across the country that what Rajib wrote in his blogs was blasphemous and “defamed” Islam as a religion. Consequently, this led to fierce clashes across the country, leaving four people dead and scores critically injured (BBC, 2013). To de-escalate tensions, the government also kept a dozen websites and blogs blocked for several weeks.



Data source: Survey – 2023

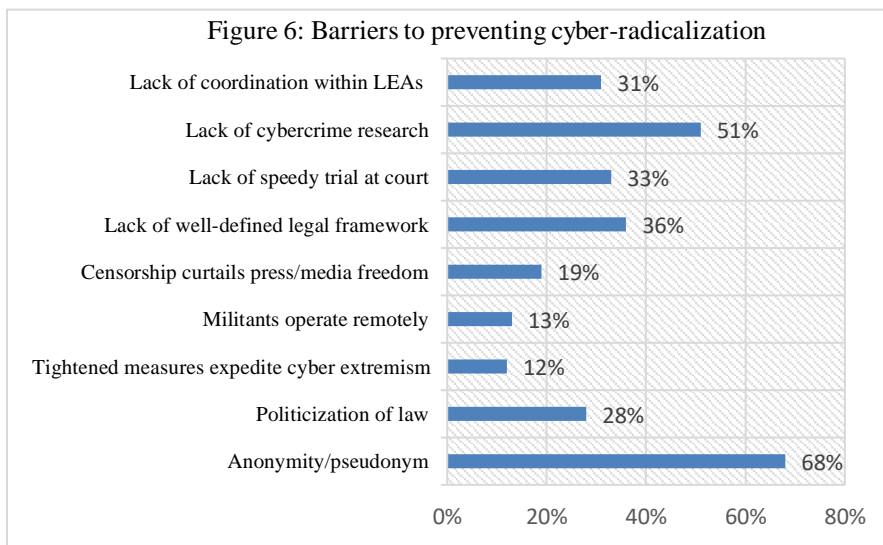
The study has found that only two major social media success stories of social media were documented between 2011 and 2015. On the contrary, social media was responsible for over a dozen incidents of communal violence and murder during the same period. The number of incidents of violence triggered by social media is constantly increasing. Ironically, only 27 percent of the survey respondents agree that people in countries with high levels of ethno-religious sensitivity should avoid using social media for political and ideological purposes. The remaining people either fully or partially disagree with the proposition. This denotes a growing interest in new media.

Legal framework on cybercrime

Different regimes in the country have undertaken different approaches to dealing with crimes committed in cyberspace. The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2006, which was formulated by the then BNP-led coalition government, is considered the basis for cybercrime law. Section 57(1) of the Act defines cybercrime as:

“If any person deliberately publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted in the website or in any other electronic form any material which is false and obscene and if anyone sees, hears or reads it having regard to all relevant circumstances, its effect is such as to influence the reader to become dishonest or corrupt, or causes to deteriorate or creates possibility to deteriorate law and order, prejudice the image of the State or person or causes to hurt or may hurt religious belief or instigate against any person or organization, then this activity will be regarded as an offense.”

Section 57(2) stipulates that committing an offense under sub-section 1 of Section 57 would result in imprisonment for up to 10 years or a fine of BDT10 million, or both penalties. Provisions of the Act are non-cognizable. LEAs are required to obtain approval from the authorities concerned before they file a case against or arrest a person accused of committing cybercrime. The current Awami League-led government, which is ruling the country for a third consecutive term, amended the Act in 2013. Under the amended Act, the term of imprisonment has been increased from 10 to 14 years. Suggesting that cybercrime is not bailable, the amended Act empowers LEAs to arrest an accused person without issuing a warrant.



Data source: Survey – 2023

The government has, however, recently finalized the draft of a new act titled “Cyber-security Act 2015” that has extended the definition of cybercrime, further increasing the term of imprisonment from 14 to 20 years for crimes committed under Section 13. It has made crimes under sections 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 of the ICT (Amendment) Act 2013 cognizable and non-bailable, further empowering LEAs to search any place or arrest any person accused of committing or attempting to commit cybercrime (Habib, 2015). The draft has provisions for setting up a national internet (cyber) security organization to protect Bangladesh’s sovereignty, national security, and territorial integrity, and to foster friendship with foreign countries. It recommends appointing a national security adviser who would be the supreme authority for all cybercrime-related decisions and simultaneously enjoy indemnity under the Act (The Daily Star, 2015b). In addition, a government committee was formed in early 2013 to monitor blogs and social media and to identify individuals who produce or post anti-Islamic content (Freedom House, 2015). The government has recently formed a counter-terrorism and transnational crime unit involving 600 police personnel. Tasks of the unit

include tracking terrorist financing and combating militancy and cybercrime.

Barriers to preventing cyber-radicalization

LEAs are unable to act proactively against fanatic elements despite having cutting-edge tools to hunt down extremists who utilize internet-based platforms to disseminate radical propaganda and threaten the lives of people, especially those who practice secularism. Only 33.3% of the survey respondents think Bangladesh has enough capacity and resources to combat cyber-extremism. There are multiple factors that make it challenging for the government to take harsher measures against cybercrime. These have been highlighted below.

Anonymity and pseudonym

Anonymity is one of the major challenges facing LEAs in combating cybercrime. There are multiple ways for radical groups to conceal their identity online. These include methods that work only on the surface, concealing a user's identity from those who are not skilled in technologies that are difficult to defeat by professional law enforcement officials despite having resources to discover source IP address and subpoena records from ISPs (internet service providers). Furthermore, radicals are increasingly using different anonymizer tools as well as proxy servers like VPNs (virtual private networks) that help them hide or disguise their identity online, escaping detention by security forces.

Politicization of law

Although the ICT (Amended) Act 2013 has given LEAs immense authority to take harsher legal actions against cybercrime, the politicization of the Act by the government itself prevents the LEAs from prosecuting actual perpetrators. When people post remarks or satirical photos criticizing political officials, especially those who are members of the ruling party, they are swiftly prosecuted. Those who are accused of cybercrime for disparaging faiths or inciting racial tensions online are still at large. Public condemnation of this politicized application of the Act is fierce. During a key informant interview (KII) conducted as part of this study, Jyotirmoy Barua, a Supreme Court lawyer, said: "If LEAs can trace people making derogatory comments in any part of the country about political leaders, we can safely assume they have the capacity to do so for other threats as well."

Fear of rapid spread of cyber-extremism

Asked why the government seems reluctant to track down religious extremists, a blogger requesting anonymity said: "The government seems to consider atheist bloggers nuisance putting the government in a tight spot and thinks if the government stands up for bloggers, it will be blamed [by the masses] for nurturing atheism." Jihadist websites actively publish content inviting Muslims in Bangladesh to join jihad. Yet, the government seems oblivious. Security analysts say that the authorities concerned could not have shut down over 100 jihadist websites after the assassination of blogger Rajib had there been an issue of lack of technical expertise, yet they are loath to pull the websites down. This is due mainly to the fear that harsher actions against jihadists may speed up cyber-radicalism. The fear of the spread of radicalism often causes the government and LEAs to refrain from imposing harsher penalties on offenders.

Remote operations

The prevention of cyber-radicalism is more difficult due to remote operations. It is challenging to locate or apprehend the administrators of the pages/sites that disseminate radical content on social media because they reside abroad. According to reports, many of the people in charge of running the Islamist fan site *Basherkellalive* abroad in order to avoid being arrested and punished for publishing offensive content online. Additionally, using proxy servers or other anonymizing software is subject to jurisdictional

restrictions. Bangladeshi LEAs cannot enter other countries to pursue legal action against the owners of those pages or websites.

Surveillance/censorship curtails press freedom

After the release of the trailer of the movie “The Innocence of Muslims,” the BTRC blocked access to YouTube from September 2012 until June 2013. The trailer fomented violent anti-American protests in Bangladesh and other predominantly Muslim countries. The surveillance of users’ activities online has become stricter since the ICT Act was amended in 2013. As digital propaganda content is on the rise, the BTRC has begun to censor content that affects religious sentiments or offends state leaders by issuing informal orders to domestic service providers (DSPs) to disclose the names of cyber-offenders. DSPs are required by law to provide the government with information about cybercriminals in accordance with the terms and conditions of their licenses (Freedom House, 2014).

Social media and international communication apps often fall victim to the government’s censorship. Once in 2012 and again in late 2015, Facebook was disabled for intervals ranging from a few hours to several weeks. The government frequently asks ISPs to provide information on those who engage in cybercrime. In the second half of 2013, Facebook restricted, at the government’s request, access to three different pieces of content containing criticisms of the government (Facebook, 2013). The actions were condemned by those who claim that the surveillance is a mechanism used by the government to seize control of Facebook and silence dissenting voices. Rights activists voice concerns that censorship by the government curtails press freedom and the people’s right to freedom of opinion and expression.

Legal quandary

Article 39 (1 and 2) of the Bangladesh Constitution recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and speech as fundamental rights. However, since the ICT Act was amended in 2013, the constitutional rights have come under severe threat. The amendment has increased the term of imprisonment and provided LEAs with virtually unbounded authority to deal with cybercrime. According to Section 57(2) of the Act, anyone electronically publishing fake, obscene, or defaming information shall be sentenced to 14 years in prison, or fined BDT10 million, or both penalties. However, anyone who publishes any defamatory material offline shall be sentenced to two years in prison under the Penal Code. Barua says this presents a conundrum: if someone commits a similar type of offense on the internet, s/he will be charged under Section 57, and the punishment will be 10 times higher. And there is no explanation as to why punitive measures for similar types of crimes committed offline or online differ in two different sets of law.

Section 3 of the ICT Act states that the provisions of the Act will take precedence over all other relevant laws. Questions arise as to who would file a case under the Penal Code, while the ICT Act stipulates a 14-year prison term along with monetary penalties. According to Barua, determining whether a comment made online or a logical explanation of aspects of a religion in a blog fall under the purview of loosely defined cybercrime is complicated. It is imperative that the police acquire both legal and technical knowledge to legitimately determine whether a comment or a post is criminal in nature. Police officers, however, lack the technical expertise necessary for assessing digital content from a criminological perspective. In addition, there is a lack of training opportunities for them on these subjects in the country.

Lack of speedy trial

The lack of speedy cybercrime trials continues to impede measures taken to prevent cyber-extremism. According to available newspaper reports, at least 136 cases have been filed under the ICT Act in the last three years (Habib, 2015). Verdicts in only 47 cases were announced. The majority of the 47 cases were lodged under the ICT Act either by LEAs or by members of the ruling Awami League for defaming the

prime minister or her family, while cases filed for defaming religions or killing bloggers remain unresolved. This reveals two distinct scenarios: the abuse of the Act for undue favor and a stalemate in cybercrime trials, which allows perpetrators to go unpunished.

Coordination and cybercrime research

Research on cyber-terrorism in the country is noticeably limited despite the growing concerns over cybercrime. As a result, there are no specific guidelines for LEAs on how to combat cybercrime. There is no dedicated organization with research capability or a clear understanding of jihadi content. LEAs cannot intervene in most cases because they fail to comprehend the magnitude of the threats posed by cybercrime. In addition, intelligence branches and LEAs rarely collaborate. There has been no agency created so far that specializes in collecting and sharing information about militant outfits involved in cyber-extremism. The lack of an organized coordination body often exacerbates efforts to crack down on real cyber-criminals.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This study has analyzed the multifaceted dynamics of cyber-extremism in Bangladesh. It has explored the extent of social media's appeal to the public and analyzed how they are used as a means for spreading extremism. None of the existing studies contains a country-specific analysis of how the misuse of social media leads to sectarian clashes in a given country, perhaps because they center on macro-level analysis with a focus on regional or global aspects of cyber-radicalization. This research has therefore been able to elaborately discuss trends in cyber-extremism in Bangladesh and its impact on public security. The purposes for which radicals are increasingly drawn into internet-based communication technologies include training, recruitment, propaganda, communication, and gathering intelligence. Investigating operational objectives of radical groups active online, the study concludes that as the increased presence of LEAs across the country has made the ground less favorable for extremists to carry out militant activities, they are increasingly turning to the internet to achieve their goals remotely and anonymously. The research has also identified major dilemmas and barriers to preventing cybercrime. These include anonymity or the use of pseudonyms on the internet, politicization of law, remote operations, and the lack of coordination and cybercrime research within LEAs. Despite the growing concerns over cybercrime, there is a dearth of research conducted by Bangladeshi scholars on this pressing topic. So, it is anticipated that the study will bridge this void of knowledge by providing a basis for further research. And it gives us as well as its readers a precise account of trends in cyber-radicalization in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

The research focuses on the ways the internet is used to promote violent extremism in Bangladesh. Internet-based social media hasten radicalization in countries with high levels of ethno-religious sensitivity. Youth are especially vulnerable to the dangers of cyber-radicalization. They are quickly manipulated by radicals to post hate material online, or they curiously run across radical content.

The study identified barriers to combating cyber-extremism. To address the challenges, it highlights the importance of taking effective measures to censor radical groups' activities on the internet while also paying adequate attention to freedom of expression so that state censorship does not impede people's right to free expression. The government should revise the existing legal framework to make it more precise and unambiguous in order to avoid policy polarization. As highlighted above, there is a dearth of research on this burning issue. The government should support cyber-security research by providing funds to individual researchers and cyber-security training to LEA officials and individual researchers. A well-equipped cyber-security analysis wing needs to be set up within the domain of LEAs. Finally, to combat the emerging threats of cyber-extremism, government agencies and NGOs need to come forward to undertake offline

initiatives such as interfaith dialogues at both local and national levels involving people from all religious backgrounds, including those who believe in infidelity, with a view to promoting tolerance among people of all strata of society.

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