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Facebook, a Potential Platform for the Dissemination of Newsworthy Facts: A Study on the 'Shahbagh Movement' 2013

Rakib Ahmed¹

Abstract

Facebook, a social media network, has turned into a successful medium of communication thanks to its millions of users sharing their personal and socio-cultural details on it every moment. During the 'Shahbagh Movement' in 2013, the Bangladeshi facebook users utilized almost all applications available on facebook with a view to encourage people to joining the demonstration and share updated details of the mass uprising. The movement stepped into the world of facebook quickly when its users, as an effort to mobilize public support to the movement, updated their profile's status with an appealing note: "*Cholo Cholo Shahbagh Cholo*" [Let's join Shahbagh]. Demanding capital punishment for Liberation War criminal, facebook users released information of the movement in texts, photos and videos through personal as well as group-based pages. Three facebook pages – *Shahbaghe Cyber Judhya*, *Projonmo Chottor* and *Station 71.13* – were particularly active in publishing different events of the movement round the clock and responded to comments and reactions made by the followers of the pages. The facebook users consider the medium as a strong platform for disseminating news in an effective way, and they believe it can be more powerful in case of releasing facts of a particular event organized and participated by the mass people. This paper intends to find out the strength of facebook in distributing facts among citizens.

In the afternoon on February 5, 2013, a group of young people, more precisely, a group of bloggers, students, and journalists, gathered at Shahbagh intersection in Dhaka to demand capital punishment for Abdul Quader Mollah, a political leader who had been convicted of committing crimes against humanity during the Liberation War in Bangladesh in 1971 and been sentenced to life imprisonment ("Outraged," 2013), and capital punishment for others convicted of war crimes by the International Crimes Tribunal. Within a couple of days, the demonstration, launched by Bangladesh Online Activist Network (BOAN), turned into a mass movement. Hundreds of thousands people from all walks of the society, ranging from freedom fighters, politicians, scholars, teachers, journalists, celebrities, and media people to homemakers, students, rickshaw pullers, housemaids, and even young children joined the demonstration and Shabagh intersection became a sea of people (Imam, 2013). Adopting a non-violence stance, the protesters spent nights on the street under the open sky and sang songs, demonstrated satiric cartoons, performed street-theatre, screened films, and made innovative programmes to keep the demand alive. Gradually, the movement spread throughout and outside the country. While many people from outside Dhaka and abroad came and joined the demonstration, many more organized similar gatherings in their localities to make the Shahbagh movement stronger. Bangladeshi television and radio channels would broadcast updates of the movement live while the dailies made the event lead for days. The movement was also covered by the international media with mixed attitude. At the long run, the government responded to people's appeal and brought necessary changes to the existing law.

The movement that was originated mainly through facebook had a huge impact on facebook when it attained an unprecedented response. Facebook pages were flooded by comments and arguments related to the movement. The facebook users used all applications available in the site, ranging from updating status and

¹ Rakib Ahmed is Lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
Email: rakib.ahmedjubd@gmail.com

writing notes to sharing photos and videos to inform more people about the demonstration with a view both to involve them and to minimize miscommunication by resisting regressive propaganda. One post, for example, reads: "In the next few hours, as I observed – on Facebook – the Shahbagh vigil spawning similar peaceful, apolitical protests all over the country, my faith was restored. I knew which side of the fence I was on. As my friend who asked me to come to Shahbagh wrote on Facebook: There are some non-negotiable issues in life. We can't negotiate when it is the question of existence, self respect and pride. The show is on... There is no party, no leader, no politics. We want justice" (Karim, *Daily Star*). The success of the use of facebook for information dissemination is evident in the fact that *Shahbaghe Cyber Judhya*, a facebook page created and maintained by some young souls, obtained over 80,000 followers within 20 days of its opening (Abdullah, a coordinator of the page). According to Abdullah, this page posted over 2,000 photos, notes, graphics and other contents on the movement in three weeks:

Our goal was to involve more people in the movement also generating public support from the virtual space. Another purpose was to fight against the propaganda spread by anti-movement sections through online. We used to collect photos of the movement, special notes write by different users, and other related materials developed by many users. And, we received huge response from the users. (Abdullah, a coordinator of *Shahbaghe Cyber Judhya*)

The present paper discusses the role of the groups that intended to gear up the Shahbagh movement by involving more people to press home the demands. Touching upon the ethical and ideological logicity, the paper argues that facebook played a significant role to make people get involved with demonstration more actively.

Facebook and the 'Shahbagh Movement' 2013

According to the 'mission' written on the official webpage of facebook, it was founded in 2004 with a mission to give people the

power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them. Similarly, Bangladeshi facebook users during the Shahbagh movement used this social media network to get connected to and updated about the historic mass uprising. The users shared information and thoughts among themselves and thus took the movement to the world users of the facebook. According to Economy Watch Report 2013, the total number of Facebook users in Bangladesh was around 10 lakh as in May 2013, having penetration rate of 0.60% (Dhaka University Institutional Repository 2014). *Shahbage Cyber Judhya* (Cyber War at Shahbagh) was launched four days after the Shahbagh demonstration got a momentum with a view to, according to the page's narrative, "publish the news of Shahbagh movement. Since all supporters and activists of the movement were in action at Shahbagh square during the protest, the anti-Shahbagh movement quarters were spreading propaganda through online platforms branding the movement as an isolated action. This page was launched to assert replies against the propaganda" (About, 2013). Throughout the movement, *Shahbaghe Cyber Judhya*, which claimed to be the mouthpiece of the Shahbagh movement, published updates of the uprising in an effort to inform its followers and persuade others to join. For example, a post on 6 March, 2013 reads: "Join us, then, brothers and sisters around the globe in ensuring that these criminals do not remain unpunished. All of us must unite to send the message that we, the people of Bangladesh, will no longer tolerate this injustice to continue" (Dhaka University Institutional Repository 2014). Launched on 13 February, 2013, *Station 71.13* is "an information and communication hub. We are delivering news, info, images and writings on the spirit of Shahbag Movement and the Liberation War of Bangladesh to the global audience" (71.13, 2013). *Projonmo Chottor*, another Facebook page, was launched on February 7, 2013, with a goal of bagging public support to the Shahbagh movement. This page, too, published information and photos of the movement

round the clock. In short description, this page writes – “Come on, wake up Bangladesh! It is the time to wake up” (*Projonmo*, 2013).

What, however, made the movement instantly successful in involving people spontaneously is its arguably apolitical nature:

Our message was clear: Don't come to Shahbagh if you want to be a hero. Don't come here looking for politics. We're Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, agnostics, atheists. As individuals, we're nobodies, but we have formed an ocean. This protest is against the vendors of religion who are trying to protect war criminals and have been wreaking havoc on the streets. We have had enough of them and our political parties have failed us. (Karim, *Daily Star*, 2013).

Consequently, along with pages dedicated to the movement, numerous individual facebook users were spontaneously active in sharing notes and uploading photographs and videos of different aspects of the movement with a view to disseminate information: “Shahbagh uprising was not the instant result of 5th February; rather a continuous conversations had been taken places in social media like facebook and blogging sites. The more conversations took place in virtual spaces the more activism got crystallized day after day” (Dhaka University Institutional Repository 2014). Thus, by releasing newsworthy facts through facebook pages to mobilize the movement, the Bangladeshi users of this network, set an example of practicing quality standard of citizen journalism. For Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, 'citizen journalism' designates the active roles a citizen or a group of people play in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information (Bowman and Willis, 2003). According to Jurrat, an independent media researcher, citizen journalism can be ranged from commenting on an existing news piece to publishing an article, podcast, photo or video on a personal blog or on Twitter, a dedicated citizen journalism website or on YouTube, or on interactive websites that work as extensions to mainstream media (Jurrat 2011). Taking the benefits of strength offered by the social

media, the youths in the Middle East mobilized movements against oppressive governments. A study conducted by Rita Safranek in 2012 states that people, by using the opportunities available in the social media, organised public motilities against establishments in Moldova, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Libya in last six years (Safranek 2012). Similarly, facebook users during the Shahbagh movement, collected facts, made them newsworthy, and released them through the pages on facebook. Moreover, in order to uphold the logicity of joining the Shahbagh protest, the facebook activists collected historical evidences and displayed them on their facebook pages. It further assisted the pro-movement people to fight back against the propoganda. Understandably, this is citizen journalism.

Equally important is the fact that this citizen journalism helped the mainstream journalism. There were cases in which journalists and media people collected (with necessary professionalism) information and photographs from the relevant facebook pages. Moreover, it helped the mainstream media to know and observe public and informed responses to the Shahbagh movement. The mainstream media was, thus, both helped and contested by the social media. Sue Burzynski Bullard, Associate Professor in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA, contended that journalists now-a-days believed that social media allows them to reach readers or audiences in multiple ways and that social media increases engagement with readers or audiences (Bullard, 2013). More than that, facebook also helped journalists to check and cross-check the facts they gathered during the Shahbagh movement which reflects what Aveseh Asough said about the scopes offered by the social media: “Journalists can reach their news sources, gather stories and verify the authenticity of stories with fewer difficulties through social networks” (Asough 2012). People's involvement with facebook during Shahbagh movement and their dependency on facebook-generated facts testifies to the fact that social media secures ant space and power to set and re-set public agenda as

strongly as the mainstream mass media. According to Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agenda to the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1999).

Objectives of the Study

The media landscape has been dramatically changed in the last two decades with traditional media being increasingly supplemented by social media like blogs and discussion forums (Stephen & Galak, 2009). As this article in its discussion of the Shahbagh movement has already pointed out, two major things have been achieved by the emergence of social media as a means of journalism: spontaneous working together and engaging the mass. Thus, the philosophical and ideological stance of facebook activism can be explained by using Irving Janis's conception of 'Groupthink.' For Janis, Groupthink is:

a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in group, when the members striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action. Groupthink occurs only when cohesiveness is high. It requires that members share a strong we-feeling of solidarity and desire to maintain relationships within the group at all costs. (Janis 1999)

Addressing the potentiality and pitfalls of facebook activism vis-à-vis Groupthink, the present study intends learn answers to the following questions:

- i) Did facebook users use the site to share personal views regarding the movement or did they want to know updates of the movement?
- ii) Were the users satisfied with the facts which were available on facebook pages about the movement?
- iii) Did they keep faith on the information which was available on facebook pages? If not, why?

iv) Were the pieces of information uploaded to different facebook pages credible and objective enough?

v) Did facebook users consume mainstream news media alongside the facebook to bag information? If they did, why?

vi) Do facebook users consider facebook as a potential medium for distributing facts?

Method

A descriptive survey research method is used to conduct the study. Observational study focuses on close and detail observation. The descriptive survey research methods are used in case of narrating trends or behaviours during a certain period. Generally, descriptive survey research methods are adopted in case of case study and observation. According to Dr. Y.P Aggarwal, descriptive research is devoted to the gathering of information about prevailing conditions or situations for the purpose of description and interpretation. This type of research method is not simply amassing and tabulating facts but includes proper analyses, interpretation, comparisons, identification of trends and relationships (Salaria, 2012).

In the present study, a total of 50 persons from 17 professions who were well concerned about the Shahbagh movement and had access to internet were interviewed through a questionnaire. The interviewees are adult, university graduates, and regular users of facebook. Of the total participants, 20 were female while 30 male. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire including the questions mentioned in the previous section. The respondents were selected randomly and were given 20 days to make proper response to the questions. The replies were then presented in tables. Moreover, with a view to include insiders' views, one of its coordinators of the pro-movement facebook page, *Shahbaghe Cyber Judhya*, Mr Kajal Abdullah was interviewed.

Results and Discussion

This section displays and discusses the results of survey questions. In the following pages, nine (09) out of 30 questions and relevant responses are presented.

One question was: "Why did you access pro-Shahbagh facebook pages during the mass uprising?" The answers were as follows:

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
23	Solidarity	46
17	Information	34
06	Generate Public Opinion	12
04	Others	08

Table 1: Reason behind accessing pro-Shahbagh facebook pages

The table shows that 46% users who were active on the social media during the Shahbagh movement spent time on the relevant facebook pages to express their solidarity toward the mass uprising whereas 34% went there for movement related information. So, it can be said that people who were active on facebook during the movement had demand for information of the movement.

Another question was: "What were your activities on facebook during the movement?" The responses are given below.

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
29	Created posts/notes/status	58
12	Shared others' posts/comments/photos	24
09	Other activities	18

Table 2: Participants' facebook activities

The table shows that 58% participants left various posts on the social medium to gear up public support for the movement. It further indicates that facebook users used the medium to disseminate information of the movement among others and thus

also communicating philosophical and ideological stance of the movement.

Replying to the question, "Do you think that the information circulated through facebook is correct and authentic?" maximum number of respondents said that they considered information released on the relevant facebook pages was "correct."

<i>Correct</i>	<i>Partly Fabricated</i>	<i>Fabricated</i>	<i>No Comment</i>
66%	23%	9%	2%

Table 3: Participants' views toward facebook information

According to the respondents, 66% information (or facts) about the movement presented by the relevant facebook pages was correct while 23% was partly fabricated. Some respondents opined that they used to consume other forms of mainstream news media alongside the facebook to crosscheck information of the movement.

A related question was: "Did you rely on facebook only to get information about the Shahbagh movement?" The responses are in the table below:

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Media Used</i>
36	Mainstream Media (72%)
14	Facebook (28%)

Table 4: Proportion of Information

The table shows that 72% participants gathered maximum news about the movement from the mainstream news media whereas 28% participants from the social media. The second group of participant added that they got every detail including small developments and common people's various activities from facebook.

In response to the question: "Were you satisfied with the amount of information you got from facebook?" the respondents answered differently.

<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Partly Satisfied</i>	<i>Not Satisfied</i>	<i>Disappointed</i>	<i>No Comment</i>
6%	46%	39%	2%	7%

Table 5: Satisfaction over facebook released information

The table shows that although the participants were active on facebook during the movement and followed relevant pages, 39% participants were not satisfied with the information they received from facebook and 46% were only partly satisfied.

Another question reads: "Why did you consume the mainstream news media besides facebook during the movement?" The responses are tabled below:

<i>For Information</i>	<i>For Explanation</i>	<i>For Forecast</i>	<i>For Information and Forecast</i>
57%	22%	14%	7%

Table 6: Reasons of consuming other media

Of the total participants, 57% said that they went to the mainstream media to get more factual information about the movement while 22% said that tried mainstream media to get expert and seasoned explanation. The participants said that the initial silence from the government about the movement had made them curious to know about government's stance and possible outcomes of the movement.

In response to the question: "Do you think that facebook is or will be a potential competitor of the mainstream news media?" most of the respondents said negative.

<i>Competitor</i>	<i>Not Competitor</i>	<i>No Comment</i>
36%	55%	9%

Table 7: Competition with the mainstream media

This table shows that 36% of the total participants consider facebook as a potential competitor of the mainstream news media in case of distributing newsworthy information among users while

55% said "no." However, the latter group assumed that facebook may appear in future as an effective platform for news distribution since its users are growing and it offers various applications and ways to share information.

A related question was: "Do you think that facebook can be a potential medium in case of distributing information of a particular public event?"

<i>Potential</i>	<i>Not Potential</i>
73%	27%

Table 8: Strength in focusing a particular event

The table shows that 73% respondents considered facebook as a strong medium for disseminating newsworthy information of a particular public event. Some participants reasoned that as people from all groups of a society are the users of facebook, small detail of a public event can be reached to millions through this social media network.

Another question was: "How fast did you get updates and other details of the movement on facebook?"

<i>Quickly</i>	<i>Very Quickly</i>	<i>Not Quickly</i>
64%	28%	8%

Table 9: Trend of producing facts

According to this table, 64% respondents thought that the newsworthy facts were released through facebook shortly while 28% said that facebook updates were very quick, uploaded almost after something happened. The respondents also added that in many cases they got updates of the movement from facebook in their cellular phones before they got it from the mainstream news media. Besides, they used to get small details and happenings of the movement round the clock in their mobile phone facebook.

Conclusion

The present article attempts to figure out the scopes available in facebook to disseminate newsworthy information effectively.

Addressing the fact that people use facebook for various purposes, ranging from expressing emotion and reaction to sharing thoughts and socio-cultural activities, the paper contends that facebook users, during the Shahbagh movement, succeeded in setting a sustainable public opinion in favour of the protest by sharing necessary facts. It also played an effective role in engaging people to foil the rumours and propaganda against the Shahbagh movement. As facebook turned into a common platform for thousands to share their thoughts about the movement, it contributed significantly to the gathering at the mass uprising. Talking about technology and mass gathering, Rita Safranek said that a large number of people can be easily and inexpensively contacted via a variety of services available on the social media. It also lowers traditional socio-economic barriers to commanding the spotlight. One does not have to "be somebody" to "be somebody" on social media (Safranek, 2012). This study finds that facebook users want to get newsworthy facts happened around them from the medium, and they give reaction to those facts spontaneously. The Shahbagh movement was a testimony to this network of connectivity. , facebook users published the news of progresses and happenings of the Shahbagh protest by writing notes and sharing photographs and videos on their individual and group-based pages. The paper also discusses how in many cases facebook users got updates of the movement through mobile phones before the same news appeared in the mainstream news media. This trend indicates the potentiality of facebook as an effective alternative medium for distributing news of a particular public event. "Mainstream media may still be powerful, but they no longer have a monopoly of the means of production or distribution. Both the authoring and distribution networks offered by social media have enabled more political parties, voluntary groups and individuals to enhance their 'communicative power' – using digital technologies strategically to form their own online networks" (Newman, Dutton, and Blank, 2012). However, a sense of discretion is required to celebrate the potentiality of facebook. While facebook encouraged the thirst to

know more, it does not always appear as an 'authentic' source of news and facts. The survey conducted for this paper shows that people do not necessarily keep faith on facts shared or released by facebook as those are not prepared and delivered by some professional certified institutions. The users are concerned about the sources of the facts released through social media, and fear that the issue of accountability may not be maintained always. Nonetheless, users consider facebook as an effective medium to circulate facts. The paper contends that, because of the applications available on facebook and the involvement of millions on the same ground, this social media network has strong potential to be an effective medium for disseminating news. According to a study released by Dhaka University Institutional Repository in 2014, the urban youth of Bangladesh are using the power of social networking for several purposes but most importantly for disseminating political thinking. However, the present paper argues that the social media should take initiative to make its users more efficient, skilled and responsible for developing and displaying information more effectively. Since the number of people having access to internet is increasing and technological devices are being available to them, facebook as a social medium, may meet users' demand for news in the days ahead throwing a challenge to other forms of news media.

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