

FIGHT AGAINST ONLINE HATE SPEECH AND MIS/DISINFORMATION THROUGH “DISCOVERING HUMANITY”: A CASE REVIEW FROM SRI LANKA

Project title: Discovering Humanity

Implementing agency/individual: Aravinda Indrajith

Central focus: Media engagement and diversification during the COVID-19 pandemic

Country/region: Sri Lanka

Grant amount: 5,000 EUR

Date of approval: 20 February 2021

Closing date: 30 November 2021

Main activities: Creation of a social research video series and an infotainment web page

Three lessons:

1. It is important to collect and listen to pandemic experiences from as many diverse voices as possible to develop nuances in positive social media messaging.
2. There is a dearth and demand for alternative and civil society initiated reliable information sources.
3. Infotainment, informed by reliable and authentic sources, can generate public interest in the context of the pandemic.

INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

Sri Lanka's fragile peace is today marred by ethno-nationalist tensions and periodic violence. The country's long history of ethno-religious divides among different communities is starkly evident today in the form of hate speech and violence, expressed in both traditional and social media. Online hate speech is often used to mobilize rioters who then attack minority communities both on and offline. After the lengthy and bitter conflict ended in 2009, grievances between the Sinhala and Tamil communities are largely unresolved. At the same time, simmering tensions leading to Islamophobia have been on the rise since the Easter bombings in 2019. Sri Lanka's large and growing youth population (23% of the total population) are often in the focus, either as perpetrators of the online hate speech, or as victims.

Intergroup tensions have been particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. The isolation that has been a central feature of the COVID-19 crisis and an uneven political response, have further frayed intercommunal relations. This adds up to serious social cohesion challenges, some longstanding and some new.

Sri Lanka's state-led measures to manage and mitigate the COVID-19 public health crisis have been impressive in some respects but have fallen short in addressing issues of social cohesion.

Government actions are often categorized as “strong,” “strict,”¹ and “forced”², which then created significant backlash among the minority communities. The country's many civil society actors have been proactive in promoting peace at the grassroots through interactive and innovative outreach activities.

¹ Hettiarachchi, D., Noordeen, N., Gamakaranage, C. et al. Ethical Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic—Lessons from Sri Lanka. ABR 13, 225–233 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00153-z>

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082882>

CASE REVIEW Fight against online hate speech and mis/disinformation through “discovering humanity”

“Discovering Humanity,” led by Aravinda Indrajith, is an AHA! small grant funded project led by one such civil society organization. It has worked to spread the message of social cohesion through positive social media narratives. The goal is to address discriminations against different communities, ethnic groups, and professions to people between the ages of 18-35 by creating a space for them to share their experiences open and freely on social media platforms such as Facebook. This case review highlights Aravinda’s distinctive approach to peacebuilding and explores applicable lessons for other practitioners across South Asia.

AHA! small grant recipients work to mitigate specific impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia, focusing on threats to social cohesion, the spread of hate speech and misinformation, and the pandemic’s unique religious and gender dimensions. Aravinda’s campaign, and similar initiatives offer significant potential to contribute to a more peaceful and inclusive Sri Lankan society.

CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY

Sri Lanka’s tensions around what is a mosaic of ethnicity, religion, and language (all intertwined) have colored its history. Of great concern today are toxic brands of nationalism, including by Buddhist monks, used often deliberately to promote discrimination, hate, and violence. Buddhist nationalism has long been a source of political mobilization in Sri Lanka, centered on the idea that Sri Lanka is a country for Sinhalese Buddhists (despite the nation’s striking multicultural diversity). Tamils, Muslims, and Christians have suffered in different ways and at different times. The toxicity of rumors and related hate speech is reflected in reported comments by Buddhist hard-liners. To cite one example: “Don’t go to Muslim businesses, because Muslim-owned clothing stores are sterilizing women’s panties to keep the Sinhalese population down.”³

Sri Lanka’s enduring ethnoreligious polarization saw a major uptick during the pre and post 2019 national election, and has gained momentum (and to some extent, been exacerbated) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hate speech in Sri Lanka is a regular phenomenon with quite wide targets: ethnic and religious groups, women, human rights and peace activists, gay and transgender people, persons living with disabilities and migrants.⁴

One example of an action that clearly linked such hate speech and communal tensions surrounded a state policy of forced cremation of dead victims of COVID-19. It ran for a year (ending in February 2021) and was justified as a necessary public health measure, even though the WHO did not recommend it. It resulted in severe backlash among the Muslim and Christian communities who felt that their freedom of religion and beliefs was not respected by the state because cremation was against their beliefs on death rituals. The government employed several army officials in critical state-level COVID-19 management roles, causing tension among the Tamil communities that carry long history of propaganda and media repression against Tamils during the civil war period.

Stereotypes, dehumanizing language use, and hate have been specifically directed towards minorities on social media since the beginning of the pandemic. A study conducted by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) between March and June 2020 found 103 instances of hate speech on social media platforms such as Facebook.⁵ Among these cases, 58% of them were targeted towards Muslims, 30% towards Christians, 5.1% attacked Tamils/Hindus, and the rest (7%) towards others.⁶ The study also found linguistic diversity among hate speech use, which highlights the complexity of inter and intra ethnic tensions. For example, most of the Sinhala language posts were targeted towards Muslims and Islam, whereas Tamil posts were almost evenly distributed towards Muslims and Tamil Christians. Muslims were particularly blamed in the initial phase of the pandemic for “prioritizing cultural practices and habits over public health concerns.”⁷ Muslims who live at the margin of the society in congested spaces have been criticized for not maintaining social distancing and spreading the virus. They are often called outright liars by some news media.⁸ Racial profiling by state officials among Muslim majority areas became a new normal during the pandemic. When Muslims protested the forced cremation policy, they are called traitors, anti-nationalists, and selfish.

³ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/a-scholar-of-extremism-on-how-religious-conflict-and-terrorism-shapes-sri-lanka>

⁴ Hate Speech in Sri Lanka During the Pandemic, 2020, MinorMatters. Available at <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/5fc/76b/014/5f-c76b014d43f554793096.pdf>

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ PREJUDICE AND PATRONAGE An Analysis of Incidents of Violence against Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in Sri Lanka. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL). <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/607/01e/fc8/60701efc8a925043964741.pdf>

⁸ ibid

The rise of hate crimes and speech incidents on social media spaces coalesces with the country's exponential growth in internet and social media use. According to recent statistics, the number of social media users in Sri Lanka increased by 23% (1.5 million) between 2020 and 2021.⁹ According to a 2019 estimate, gender disparity remains high in terms of accessing social media (64.7% of the users were men and 35.3% were women).¹⁰ Hate crimes and hate speech also flourished in the culture of impunity and lack of political will. Existing laws such as the Penal Code, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR Act), and the Prevention of Terrorism Act make provisions for hate crimes and hate speeches as offenses. However, these laws are often selectively used against ethnoreligious minorities and political opponents.¹¹

Like other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has seen a rise in domestic violence and online misogyny during the pandemic. Sexist trends on social media are increasingly prominent, with rumors and misinformation—about women harming their husbands during lockdown, or about women's rights rallies endangering public health—drawing pejorative and misogynistic commentary. Workers in the apparel industry, overwhelmingly female, have been stereotyped and stigmatized following news of COVID-19 infections at factories.¹²

Apart from targeted hate speech, Sri Lanka's print, electronic, and social media are a fertile ground for mis and disinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. State controlled and mainstream media often withhold information or downplay risk. Websites and social media platforms often spread mis/disinformation as well as misinterpretations of guidelines, without any accessible fact checking mechanism in place. Some of the common examples of disinformation include that the Sri Lankans are naturally invincible against the virus because of the tropical climate, stronger immune system compared to their Western counterparts, and the prevalence of Ayurvedic tradition.¹³ Mis/disinformation in the country came even from the (ex) health minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, who herself endorsed a potion against COVID-19 made by a sorcerer and poured a pot of "blessed" water into a river to end the pandemic.¹⁴

ARAVINDA INDRAJITH'S FIGHT AGAINST ONLINE HATE SPEECH AND MIS/DISINFORMATION THROUGH "DISCOVERING HUMANITY"

Aravinda, a Lecturer in communication and media with more than 15 years of experience as a professional journalist, brings years of experience working as a media director for many civil society organizations. A social activist at heart, Aravinda leveraged his media and communication skills, a large following over the social media, and an access to a huge young student population in Sri Lanka through the AHA! funded project, "Discovering Humanity."

Aravinda identified a major problem of Sri Lanka's current media scene: "the majority of media subscribers in the country today have become puppets dancing in the hands of two or three TV channel owners. As a result, the right of the people to have an independent opinion has been completely abolished and the people have come to believe that what is shown on television is the absolute truth." (trans. from Sinhala to English). He understood the risk of such concentration of power and control over information flows, particularly during a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. He also saw how Muslims were victimized by the media during the early days of the pandemic. Aravinda, who wrote thousands of social media posts that upheld the values of social cohesion during the 2018 Sinhala-Muslim conflict, wanted a complete "ideological change."¹⁵ His project "Discovering Humanity" enabled him to strive for the change through social media outreach and communication.

⁹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-sri-lanka>

¹⁰ Hate Speech in Sri Lanka During the Pandemic, 2020, MinorMatters. Available at <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/5fc/76b/014/5f-c76b014d43f554793096.pdf>

¹¹ Hate Speech in Sri Lanka During the Pandemic, 2020, MinorMatters. Available at <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/5fc/76b/014/5f-c76b014d43f554793096.pdf>

¹² <https://www.ft.lk/opinion/The-COVID-19-second-wave-and-the-apparel-industry/14-708902>

¹³ <https://www.freiheit.org/sri-lanka/sri-lankas-fight-against-infodemic-during-pandemic>

¹⁴ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210816-sri-lanka-axes-health-minister-over-covid-misinformation-as-outbreak-grows>

¹⁵ Personal interview, dated 1/27/2022

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The “Discovering Humanity” project had two major components: a social research video series and an infotainment web page. Aravinda conducted several short interviews with young people from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds to better understand their perceptions about the pandemic. His interviews sought basic information about attitudes including towards the COVID-19 virus. By asking “simple” questions, Aravinda notes, he wanted to understand differences in opinions and ideologies, existing social cleavages and tensions, spread and reach of mis/disinformation, and also challenge some of the deep-rooted social prejudices. The interviews have stories of discrimination and fear—how Muslim small businessmen have been suffering all through the pandemic, how a Muslim school girl was socially isolated by her classmates, how a young Muslim woman could not continue her job due to workplace harassment by her coworkers, and how journalists are scared to publish the truth. He produced 28 videos from his interviews and posted them on his social media page <https://www.facebook.com/thepulseofyouth/>.

Aravinda’s second project output involved creation of a Facebook page that would work as an alternative source of credible information and positive messaging in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. He regularly posts authentic public health guidelines, announcements, relevant news from reputed sources, and public awareness related audio-visual materials on his page. So far, more than 950 people have directly or indirectly interacted with his Facebook page. In addition, 35 youth leaders, 18 women leaders, and 8 religious leaders were directly reached by the project.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE “DISCOVERING HUMANITY” INITIATIVE

- Sri Lanka is facing a heightened social and political crisis, where religious divides among different communities play significant roles in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the de jure and de facto majoritarian state policies have generally failed to offer credible information and equitable services to the country’s ethnoreligious minorities, projects like “Discovering Humanity” strive to create, albeit in a relatively limited way, a welcoming digital space where people can feel comfortable to share their experiences, access authentic information, and question their biases and prejudices.
- Aravinda’s work highlights the need to collect as many diverse COVID-19 experiences as possible from different stakeholders in the society. Aravinda adds another pertinent layer to this by focusing on how people from different backgrounds were accessing information about the pandemic. The 28 videos that he produced as part of this initiative would offer valuable insights about Sri Lanka’s overall COVID-19 response.
- Aravinda’s online interventions through targeted positive messaging in social media pages were informed by his deep knowledge about Sri Lanka’s media industry and his direct interactions with a diverse group of people that he interviewed. He understood the gaps in both the access and quality of information, and thus designed his interventions accordingly.

Aravinda faced several challenges during the implementation phase of his project. State imposed lockdowns and curfews delayed the project inputs. Many of his interviewees were not comfortable with video shooting and social media exposure. Several were reluctant to comment on the discrimination and marginalization that they face daily because of the fear of possible persecution. Aravinda guaranteed anonymity to obfuscate such challenges. The project duration was short by design, and thus its long-term impacts, particularly on social-behavioral change, cannot be predicated yet. However, Aravinda firmly asserted during an interview that he will “continue speaking about ethical use of the media space and minority rights no matter what.”

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