

# VIRALSLIDE

## Does 'Virality' Matter?

### Rising Teesta water

#### Unilateral manipulation of water should stop

USUALLY, when we pen editorials on the Teesta river, it is to express our concern over the alarming drop in the flow of Teesta water into our territory. This time, however, the five upazilas in Lalmonirhat are suffering not from a scarcity of water, but an abundance of it – many areas have been flooded over the last two days, and the threat of displacement from flood looms over at least one lakh people on the shoals and chars of the Teesta river. It is feared that the scenario will only worsen if water keeps on being released through the barrages in Sikkim and West Bengal, and that there may be large-scale flood in Bangladesh's northern districts.

According to reports, with the western districts in West Bengal experiencing heavy rainfall over the last one week, all 44 gates of Teesta Barrage have been kept open since Wednesday night due to pressure of upstream water. While we sympathise with the plight of the people of West Bengal who have to deal with the flash floods, we think that if the barrage had to be opened, the best course of action would have been to give prior warning to Bangladesh. It would have allowed our authorities to warn the local people of the impending danger and take appropriate measures to deal with the disaster.

The management of Teesta water is a bilateral issue, and its water should not be manipulated unilaterally by one party, particularly when lives are at stake. It is imperative that both India and Bangladesh work together for an equitable distribution of Teesta water such that people's well-being on both sides of the river is ensured.

Meanwhile, the government must act fast to manage the imminent disaster, move vulnerable communities to safety and provide relief to the flood-hit people.

### British MP murdered

#### We condemn it

WE condemn in the strongest possible terms the senseless murder of Ms. Joe Cox on June 16. She was a Member of Parliament for the Labour Party and was killed in cold blood while talking to local people about their problems. She leaves behind two children and a husband. MP Cox will be best remembered for her work with charities that worked to tackle poverty and discrimination, a person who was a dedicated campaigner for social justice. Her brutal death comes a week before the EU referendum and the vote has been put off for a week. It is unclear at this time whether the murder will have any impact on the Brexit debate and the vote.

The accused, 52-year old Tommy Mair is said to be a Nazi sympathiser who may have disagreed with Ms. Cox over her stance on Britain's need to remain within the common market, but there is no room for murder in a liberal democracy over a difference of opinion. The British prime minister's outrage and statement of the killing as an "attack on democracy" is not misplaced.

Ms. Cox lived to do service to the community and worked for tolerance and that is perhaps how she will be remembered. Britain has lost a young, vibrant and genuine representative of the people. We join the rest of the world in extending our condolences to the family and firmly believe that justice will be served in getting to the bottom of what triggered the incident that cut short Ms. Cox's life.



ADNAN R AMIN

another year: remember the #RichKids incident where a drunken teen (a former MP's nephew) without a license rammed four people with his SUV? Or the tragic death of Rajon, who's inhumane beating became a viral video sensation? See any patterns? Well – most, if not all, of these incubated and spread in the virtual world, before being channeled into the mainstream (electronic & print) media.

Social media has been playing an important role in breaking and prioritising news stories. Journalist Derek Thomson argued that, "social media is the new homepage." Many social media users now depend on sites like Facebook and Twitter for their news (globally, Facebook sends 3.5 times more traffic than Google). Once broken, news that catches the fancy of social media is rapidly shared. News that fails to attract the fancy of urban netizens (internet users), eventually gets sidelined in the media agenda; and by extension, in national civic discourse.

In the context of social media, 'virality' is the tendency of a text or photo (content) to be widely copied and rapidly circulated by internet users.

American thinker and author Malcolm Gladwell defined the 'tipping point' as "that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire." Virality is the tendency of online content to go beyond the tipping point. Emotionally evocative contents – funny, inspirational, quirky, daring, passionate, dramatic and unpredictable – often go viral. Recent research shows that negatively charged content is just as likely to go viral as positively charged ones.

The prime measure of 'virality' is the 'number of shares' (i.e. number of users who copied and propagated that particular content). Thanks to social media analytics, such propagation can be easily quantified and can thus function as an important compass of public opinion. In a sense, every 'share' on the internet, is an endorsement, a vote of support. The exact reasons for content going viral are still contested. But what is known is that sharing beyond a certain threshold triggers a sort of intellectual groupthink and includes a bandwagon effect. Thus viral content starts to self-propagate and wield its agenda-shaping power.

Now that we've established what virality is, let's ask how media professionals are influenced by it. Naturally, our journalists, reporters and editorial staff are constantly immersed in viral content and such immersion must influence their worldview and politics. Since the Shahbag protests and its macabre aftershocks, mainstream journalists and analysts have parroted the script from the pulpit, with little critical thinking. Soon, bloggers' arguments began to be included in mainstream analyses. When the #RichKid phenomenon drew flak from social media users, mainstream reporting too latched on to the online characterisation of 'an MP's nephew'. Our media failed to challenge the phrasing of 'hacking', in the wake of the BB heist (such language precludes the

onus of pushing an economic and a human development agenda. It must uphold meritocracy and undermine nepotism. Most of all, it must demand justice, criminal and social. Media that merely prints shop-talk or mimics mob sentiments – is neutered media. It is media that has conceded that 'news' is a business, and not a struggle; it is media that is no longer a passion and/or a duty, but a tangent to sales and advertising. This is also where the invisible wall between editorial and business functions becomes permeable, allowing for free-reign politicisation of media voices.

When Viral Slide occurs, i.e. when virality starts to lead the agenda, the urban concentrations of social capital and political clout exert unacceptable degrees of control and thus the structural integrity of a democracy is

the same was the case with most social media commentary.

It appears as though viral slide causes not only disparate uptake of viral stories, but also a transference of the lens through which such stories are framed. This is to say that mainstream media often frames stories just as they were framed on social media.

Let's go back to the example: in the #RichKids incident, the narrative was about a spoilt, rich brat whose politico-economic privilege exempted him from all consequences. Yet our media failed to ask why the police had escorted him off the scene, instead of putting the inebriated teen under arrest; or on whose authority they were acting thus. They failed to ask how parents should be held accountable for underage wards' offenses. It is as if social media has



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involvement of insiders). The brief PR campaign against SWIFT came to signify the stance media journalism would take on this issue. Such repeated failure to break from viral issues and their online framing, may suggest that to select and interpret 'worthy' stories, media professionals are, consciously or otherwise, relying on 'virality' as a metric; i.e. online popularity is driving the mainstream agenda and providing interpretations. This is an important shift that could replace 'merit' or 'newsworthiness' with 'virality' as the main criteria for agenda-setting.

Let's label this the 'Viral Slide' of media.

Why is this important? Well, because it affects the motivation and manner of how media journalism selects news stories. The proverbial free media has an

compromised. It leaves the commoners vulnerable to the rulers' wrath.

To understand how viral slide affects media, think of how the teacher's punishment episode was reported. The story was of 'an elderly headmaster's humiliation'. Why did our media not frame the incident from other angles? Why was it compelled to stick to a single story? There is so much to think about after an episode like that: should we reconceptualise the balance of state and traditional justice systems in Bangladesh? How can lawmakers be discouraged from dispensing popular and instant justice? Are mosques at risk of being exploited as hate speech and propaganda sources? But even the intellectual discourse did not go past the sentimental outrage, symbolic remorse and vicarious penitence. Interestingly,

become the new frontier of public intellectualism. It is a discomforting thought that some months from now another teen will probably ram another rickshaw and the country will be busy identifying whose nephew he is.

Therefore, I posit that we, and our civil society, need to better understand the Viral Slide phenomenon. Some questions to ask would be: is mainstream media really imitating a narrow social media space? What are its socio-cultural ramifications? What is to be the sociopolitical, pedagogical and policy response? In a sequel to this article, I will write about why virality might be gaining influence and how to think about this.

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.

## Ramadan Musings

NAAZ FAHMIDA

I find this month to be the best time of the year to do some serious contemplation. In the absence of one of the biggest distractions of our day, i.e. spending two hours before lunch thinking what to have for lunch, the abstinence of unkind thoughts or at least the attempts to do so, shakes up our system. Once you become an adult and start dictating the actions of your own life, seldom does an opportunity come when you question your methods and are made to think twice! This is perhaps the most liberating aspect of this month of Ramadan that it has the potential to free your mind because with every pang of hunger comes a sense of guilt and retrospection for those practising and celebrating.

This year amongst a lot of other things, the most heart-warming was perhaps the emphasis that I see on social media on keeping our thoughts clean, not just staying hungry! Other than the most popular figure of our era, Nouman Ali Khan, and his fantastic, very commendable efforts and take on Quranic teachings and lifestyle, I also see other, not-so-religious platforms come up with video clippings on how Ramadan is not about merely abstaining from food and drink. I find this deviation from talks of iftari items or Eid shopping, refreshing! It is all the more necessary in this part of the world where our conformations or reasons to act in a certain way have always had more to do with what we convince the society to think, than what we are able to make ourselves believe.

Growing up, I have often heard parents boasting about how many times their children pray a day to how

many *rozahs* they have committed to this year. While there can never be enough compliments and encouragement coming from parents about their younglings, often, just like the competitive report card comparisons, which in the later part of their lives encourage them to

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boast about how much money they make, they all come with a certain negative connotation. Particularly in the Indian subcontinent, the meaning of success in a majority of the cases has involved bragging, and the

rate of success sadly dependant on how much you have been able to promote it. Knowing how the societal structure in this part of the world is built around putting others down, I find it should make God-fearing people ashamed or at least scared, before they throw in a religious compliment about their child while boasting in front of other parents, putting their children down. A good point to boast about is not how often your child prays but what a kind-hearted human being he or she has turned out to be as a result perhaps.

I believe the matter is far more complicated in our part of the world than merely labelling or stereotyping people based on how much or how little they cover, how pious they appear and whether or not they are seen at the mosque for prayers. Being involved in any of the aforementioned activities is undoubtedly a massive feat, but absolutely toxic if it comes at the expense of kindness, humility and modesty.

The simple messages that appear throughout Islamic texts are about showing kindness – be kind to your neighbour, be kind to your colleagues, be kind to the person you sit next to when you travel! Sadly, the essence of this simple message that has the highest potential of answering all our questions simply eludes us, while we spend hours trying to decipher whether we are allowed to kill in Islam, or marry four times. The answer had always been around but fools question it. Because perhaps it is easier to talk about the journey of your religious mission, to show people how pious you are, but that much harder to genuinely show kindness.

The writer is an HR specialist and a Communications Advisor.

## COMMENTS

**"College teacher hacked at home"**  
(June 16, 2016)

Michio Kaku

No life is secure in Bangladesh. The state seems to be busy, tightly holding on to power, turning a blind eye and deaf ear to all other threats.

**"Troops will be sent, if necessary"**  
(June 14, 2016)

Rashed Iqbal

As long as the Saudis have oil, they'll be safe. USA will keep them safe at any cost.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Price hike in Ramadan

It has become a tradition that the prices of almost all essential commodities like chickpea, lentil, onion, sugar, and edible oil would go up before and during the holy month of Ramadan. In spite of the commerce minister's commitment to keep the market stable throughout the month of fasting, the prices of Ramadan essentials have already gone up several times, creating suffering for the fixed

income group.

Efficient management and strict monitoring are essential to keeping the market stable. We urge the TCB and the commerce ministry to intervene by taking stern actions against the unscrupulous traders who create this artificial crisis for making profit, without caring about the common people.

Juel Rana, University of Dhaka

### Adieu, the greatest

Mohammad Ali was not only known for his boxing prowess, he was also known for always standing up for justice and humanity. Mohammad Ali may have passed away, but his teachings shall live on forever.  
Nafis Nihal Ferdous  
Anandaniketan School, Sylhet

### "Two years of Modi government"

Reading the above mentioned wonderful article by Kuldip Nayar (published in TDS on June 9, 2016), I couldn't help but listen Modi's speech to the Joint Session of Congress in Washington. Modi managed to hood-wink the entire house, not letting the Westerners realise his agenda of 'Hindutva'. Mr. Nayar's penultimate paragraph should reawaken all of us ("Modi himself was an RSS pracharak... given rise to extremist groups in different regions.")  
Ashfaq Chowdhry, Banani, Dhaka