



Digital Media and Political Communication in Bangladesh: A New Wave of Democratic and Pluralistic Politics?

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Abstract

A healthy and democratic political community is built on effective and meaningful communication among diverse political groups and individuals. Political engagement in earlier days was confined to a limited number of people, which often impeded the rational criticism and effectiveness of public policies. In Bangladesh, many people remain outside the boundaries of policymaking. To a certain degree, traditional media failed to bridge the gap between public and political authority. Digital media has recently entered into public life and offers various groups a chance to engage in political communication. Even communication through digital media has started to determine the fortune of political events in Bangladesh like elsewhere in the world. Therefore, digital media, as a key player in political communication, has to be studied carefully. In this article, it has been discussed why and how digital media has earned power regarding political communication. This study also seeks the state of democracy and political pluralism in contemporary Bangladesh. Identifying three key players of Bangladesh politics: political leaders, political activists, and grassroots citizens, this article further elucidates the nature of their chemistry in the digital age.

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1. Introduction

Politics begets both content and conflict. Bangladesh has become a nation-state after a series of political contestations and disorders after the creation of undivided Pakistan in 1947. In another sense, Bangladesh is an offspring of political discourses and mass struggles. Although media support was limited during the political upheavals, political communication did not cease to take place. The first General Election in 1970 contrived the fate of Bangladesh. A landslide victory (160 among 300 National Assembly seats in East Pakistan) of Awami League (AL) led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was one of the most decisive incidents in the history of Bangladesh (Baxter, 1971). It was also an important example of the political participation of Bangalee people.

Every individual is political, but not all of them always actively participate in politics. Even though they participate, their access, contributions, and recognitions may not be equal. However, the previous scenarios may have been changing in recent years. Digital media, as a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, has been stimulating politics and political communication. Social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook and Twitter, blogosphere like *Somewherein* and *Istishon*, and video streaming sites like Youtube and Dailymotion are exerting impacts on both the politicians and the public. Online discourses and debates contain political dialects and criticisms. Due to the unique nature of cyberspace, it seems more democratic and convenient for political discussions. However, there has been much debate about the democratic nature of digital media: whether it preserves public interest and political pluralism or create new kind of inequalities based on social stratifications and identities (Bobkowski & Smith, 2013; Effing et al., 2011; Loader & Mercea, 2011, 2012).

Internet-based political communication in contemporary Bangladesh is seemingly a combination of two interlaced features: the user-generated content (UGC), such as video, text, and photo, and the patterns of user's behavior, such as rhetoric, directives and the

online mob. Netizens' behaviors are expressed through the contents they produce, receive, and disseminate. Therefore, the contents of netizens hint about the nature of their political participation.

Little research has been done in this field to date. In this respect, this study has tried to explore the nature of political communication in Bangladesh in the age of digital media. The following three main sections are designed chronologically. First, a brief history of political communication during the traditional media has been sketched. Second, the nature of political communication in the digital age has been tried to elucidate. Third, the previous and contemporary role of three key political actors have been revisited. In this part, I borrowed the idea of *Political Man* from the eminent political theorist Robert Dahl. Overall, this article has searched for the different facets of political interactions primarily on social media and if digital media promote a new version of democracy and pluralism in terms of political participation.

2. Political Communication before Digital Media

Before unraveling the changing nature of political communication in Bangladesh, one needs to understand the concept of political communication. The necessity of communication in politics was widely recognized, specifically after the 1920s, when the wave of communication research around the world was getting stronger (Park & Pooley, 2008). However, political communication as a separate sub-discipline is a recent development. Political communication is often defined as:

...pure discussion about the allocation of public resources (revenues), official authority (who is given the power to make legal, legislative and executive decision), and official sanctions (what the state rewards or punishes). (Denton & Woodward, 1990)

This definition, secluding other political components and processes, is incomplete. To elaborate, political communication incorporates not only the speech and discourse but also the paralanguage and contents used by the involved parties. Therefore, political communication is the interaction of certain dependent groups who

also engage in various political activities to achieve self-interests. According to the American Political Science Association (APSA), political communication is:

“...the creation, shaping, dissemination, processing and effects of information within the political system—both domestic and international—whether by governments, other institutions, groups or individuals” (Kenski & Jamieson, 2017)

On the other hand, the National Communication Association (NCA) conceptualizes political communication as:

“...the communicative activity of citizens, individual political figures, public and governmental institutions, the media, political campaigns, advocacy groups and social movements.” (Kenski & Jamieson, 2017)

Furthermore, the International Communication Association (ICA) states that political communication is the interplay between communication and politics. It emphasizes on the transactions among citizens and governments, and among officials as well (Kenski & Jamieson, 2017).

2.1 Political communication in pre-independent Bangladesh

Before the emergence of Bangladesh as a liberated country, the Indian subcontinent endured a 190-years long British rule. The native people then were subject to colonial oppression with restricted political rights. In the British colonial regime, most people were out of the sphere of political communication as political power was not based on general people's consent. Instead, the British colonial masters communicated with a few local elites to consolidate their interests.

After the partition of 1947, unified Pakistan (East and West Pakistan) as a utopian nation-state came into being. West Pakistan started taking economic, political, and social advantages, while East Pakistanis started participating in national politics through procession and demonstration (Mustafa & Nawaz, 2014). Few remarkable incidents from 1947 to 1971 were the Bengali Language Movement of 1952, the Provincial Election 1954, the Education

Movement in 1962, the Six-point Movement in 1966, the Mass Uprising in 1969, and AL's victory in 1970 election ("Bangladesh Timeline," 2018; "Evaluating the 1962," 2009; Biswas, 2018). The use of banners and festoons decorated with strong political language was abundant then.

The birth of Bengali nationalism fueled political contestation between two separate provinces of undivided Pakistan. Several slogans became highly popular during that period. Some of these are still being used to ignite the sense and pride of Bengali nationalism. Few examples are: "*Rashtrō bhasha Bangla chai*" (We want Bengali as state language); "*Jinnah Miār Pakistan, Azimpur Gorosthan*" (Jinnah's Pakistan is nothing but a cemetery); "*Tomar-amar thikana, Padma-Meghna-Jamuna*" (Our address is Padma-Meghna-Jamuna); "*Bir Bangali ostro dhorō, Bangladesh shadhin koro*" (Brave Bengalees, take the weapon and liberate Bangladesh); "*Joy Bangla*" (Victory of Bengali), and so on. During pre-independent Bangladesh, political contents contained revolutionary tone and hostile language (Haidar, 2016).

Swadhin Bangla Betar, a radio channel, carried out effective political communication by broadcasting nationalistic songs and political speeches during the Liberation War in 1971. Furthermore, the Daily Ittefaq, a pro-liberation newspaper, assisted the whole process of independence from the beginning of the struggle. Many international media, including Sunday Times and The Guardian, circulated the plight of Bangalees across the globe. However, several pro-Pakistan media stood against the independence of Bangladesh as well (Banglapedia, 2014; Chaity, 2018; Dummett, 2011; Mohaiemen, 2008).

2.2 Political communication in the post-independence period

The post-independence period was full of political upheavals. Within the first three years of independence, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of Bangladesh, formed a one-party political system known as BAKSAL that stands for Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (Rashiduzzaman, 1977). Under the Newspaper Ordinance in 1975, all except four state-funded newspapers were annulled. The law hindered mediated political communication to a certain degree (Banglapedia, 2015a). Meanwhile, the emergence of

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) in 1972 as a strong opposition party added a new flavor in Bangladesh politics. The political environment in the following decade was full of violence, revenge, coup, and counter-coup. Mass people were out of the boundary of these political contestations (Ahmad, 2014; Banglapedia, 2015b).

To a certain degree, between 1975 and 1977, the political future of Bangladesh became uncertain after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, and before the military era began. During this time, Bangladesh was about to enter a new phase of political dictatorship. A few years later, agitation against the military-backed dictatorial rule commenced, Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad was the supreme leader then. Political slogans like *soirachar nipat jaak, gonotontro mukti paak* (Get down the dictator and let the democracy live) fueled the mass uprising in the second half of the 1980s. Once again, the tone of revolutions was reappeared in the political arena of Bangladesh (Riaz, 2016).

3. Digital Media in Political Communication

The pattern of political engagement and the political environment began to change in the 1990s. It was due to the restoration of democracy and the advent of digital media, simultaneously. People in Bangladesh started using the internet from 1997, internet users were 0.001 percent of the total population. The number of users has been growing at a rapid pace since then (World Bank, 2018). Besides, contemporary Bangladesh is allegedly moving toward a more authoritarian regime under the rule of Sheikh Hasina. In this circumstance, the internet is thriving with more democratic and pluralistic features of politics, such as open and wide online participation, the emergence of pressure groups, policy discussion, and policy change. Hereby, three distinct areas of transformation are sighted in regards to political communication: the content of political communication, the pattern of interaction in political communication, and the impact of political communication.

Content is considered as the main component in any political communication. In a broader sense, content includes both the language used in political communication and the form it takes to pass through the communication channels. The language in content

produces various meanings. The forms and channels of contents, according to McLuhan & Lapham (1994), often regulate the effectiveness of the messages. Contents used in traditional political communication are analog, either printed or written, such as posters, banners, festoons, and illustrations. These contents need to display in physical settings and distribute through hand to hand. In contrast, digital political content is produced and distributed in and by digital media. These contents include photos, videos, and written texts, which are easily reproducible and cost-effective.

Interaction in the age of traditional media was much linear. Ordinary citizens were passive audiences in terms of media usage. However, in the digital age, political interaction is multidimensional, and every political entity can participate in political discourse actively. Such easier access to political discourse and information leads engaged citizens to contribute to policymaking and policy change (AR, 2015).

In the political context of Bangladesh, digital media has become a successful instrument of communication precisely from the second half of the 2000s. One reason for this could be the lag of the traditional media compared to the digital media in serving the public interests properly. Besides, political participation in cyberspace, to some extent, has been directing the politics in Bangladesh. Social movements and mass mobilizations have gained new momentum in the 2010s. Social media-led movements are becoming prominent in Bangladesh political arena. Some examples were the Shahbag Movement in 2013, the No Vat on Education Protest in 2015, the Road Safety Movement in 2018, and the Quota Reform Movement in 2018. The Shahbag Movement, as the first *social media movement* in Bangladesh, received the recognition of the same as the Egyptian or Tunisian revolutions (Roy, 2018).

Two exclusive attempts from political authority have been seen considering the potential of digital media in social mobilization. One, issuing new regulations such as the Digital Security Act 2018 to control digital media. Two, measuring public temper before implementing policy and taking the collective consents into account (Ahmed, 2018; Hasan, 2018). Why and how digital media has become an effective tool of political communication in contemporary Bangladesh is discussed briefly under the following four themes.

3.1 From passive audience to active participant

Communication within the traditional media system is mainly one-way, where the public as the audience is passive. In respect of political communication, they have to listen or read what political leaders say/write in radio, television, and/or newspaper. Therefore, leaders and media both are active to supply the messages to the public, while the public play a passive role as receivers. It is a top-down process. For the first time, digital media enable the inactive group in political structure to produce and supply their messages. Thus, cyberspace alleviates the silent citizens to active participants in politics (Effing et al., 2011). Since the digital public sphere becomes widely accessible, people start harvesting its benefit by arranging political discourses. Thus, digital media offer interconnectivity and successful marriage between political authority and citizens. It makes the communication process two-way and fruitful in terms of feedback.

3.2 Relationship beyond communication

Sidelining the one-way communication, digital media has established a two-way efficacious communicative environment in Bangladesh politics. As a result, political figures now have online profiles. The ordinary citizens can reach them easily, and directly at any time. While the distance between politicians and citizens was increasing in Bangladesh, the digital platform is bridging the gap. In interactive SNSs, politicians come into close contact with ordinary citizens by producing texts, photos, and videos: people either applaud or criticize these contents. Therefore, beyond just communication, through interactive political communication, digital media is building a relationship of trust and clarity among engaged participants (Giansante, 2015; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018).

3.3 Access, production, and dissemination of information

In the digital age, everyone can become a potential medium using cyberspace as access to information becomes easier. Cyberspace lets people become the producers of information. Therefore, the information in digital media becomes aplenty (Giansante, 2015). In Bangladesh, like elsewhere in the world, mediated communication has been undergoing an intense convergence. The mainstream press is losing its previous appeal to the people and found a new

ness in new media (Alam, 2013). Availability of and access to information has become highly internet-centric due to its unique nature. For this reason, people are ostensibly becoming more dependent on SNSs and other digital media sources for acquiring information (Ha, Yoon, & Zhang, 2013). This gradual paradigm shift lets political communication become multifaceted as well.

3.4 Language and trend of political discourse

Language incorporates verbal and non-verbal expressions. The use of vile language and name-calling against the opposition is practiced widely among the political parties and supporters. According to Alam (2014), these people “think more with the heart than with the head.” Language and attitude of political discourse in digital media are influenced by offline politics. As populism is on the rise in Bangladesh like many other countries, politicians tend to attract the public with a plethora of promises and hopes, not much of those become a reality afterward. (Jakaria, 2017). These political manuscripts are full of political rhetoric (Higgins & Walker, 2012). For example, perceiving the potential of the youth, AL tries to convince the massive community with the idea of Digital Bangladesh in the elections of 2009, 2014, and 2018 (Awami League, 2018).

On the other hand, the narrative used by politicians in digital media is scrupulous and constructive in nature. Unlike earlier times, digital media empowered the users to be the judge of the political narrative as well. Therefore, politicians need to publish their content based on the perceived psyche of the netizens. Their speech can be exhortation or dissuasion, and praise or blame (Aristotle, 1991).

Political blaming is common in Bangladesh’s political culture, even in cyberspace. For example, during the last election campaign in digital media, AL urged netizens not to cast their votes for Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), AL’s chief political rival. AL’s reasons for this campaign were that BNP is the anti-liberation force, whereas AL is a pro-liberation force; BNP patronizes the politics of revenge, whereas AL leads progressives; and compared to BNP, AL accomplishes more development activities during its tenure, such as Padma Bridge and increased GDP.

4. Key Political Actors in Political Communication

Political communication, according to Perloff (2014), includes three key players: political leader, media, and public. To extend more, he opines that political communication is played on the ground of media. On the other hand, theorizing political organization, media, and citizens as three fundamental actors in the political system, McNair (2011) proposes a model of political communication in the age of mediation. In this model, political organizations are depicted as a combined body of political parties, public organizations, pressure groups, terrorist organizations, and government. This interactional model of political communication centering media contains two communicative parties on either side: citizens as the core political participants, and political parties (the most crucial part of the political organizations) as the ultimate authority. Media communicate politics through a variety of communication elements, such as reports, commentaries, etc. Citizens partake in politics through opinion polls, blogs, and other forms of citizen journalism, whereas political bodies take part in politics through advertising, PR, programs, etc. However, it seems the model is appropriate for the traditional media system. The contemporary nature and function of digital media as a mediator of political participants is relatively different than the McNair's model. Digital media play its role differently (by letting the contending groups interact directly) than the traditional media.

Furthermore, Dahl (1970) proposes a political stratification that has mainly two poles: political and apolitical. The political stratum, according to him, includes the powerful and the power-seekers, he calls it the "political man." However, unlike Dahl, I want to argue that beyond these two entities, the grassroots citizens demand a separate category within the political stratum due to its unique characteristics. Therefore, borrowing the idea of Political Man from Dahl, I sort out three key political actors for the digital media system political leaders, political activists, and grassroots citizens. Each group interacts with another directly or indirectly or via another party simultaneously. They harness digital media to communicate both within their groups and with other groups as well.

4.1 Political leaders as support-seekers

A political leader is a party member who holds the apex position in the communicative and authoritative power pyramid. A leader is usually a support-seeker whose intent is to gain popularity among the public. Political leaders in the Bangladesh party system are approved and promoted by the political parties. It is important to note that the demarcation line between the government and political parties in Bangladesh is somewhat blurry. On the other hand, Bangladesh has a well-established practice of patronage politics (Lewis, 2011). “A system of individual traditional patrimonial leadership based on charisma, patronage, and corruption” can also be seen in contemporary Bangladesh politics to date (Kochanek, 1993). However, recently, the attitude of political leaders is changing. Perceiving the power of digital media and following the contemporary trends, politicians are adapting digital know-how to get forecast about public opinion (Kanungo, 2015; Shen, 2013; Talukder, 2017).

Political leaders depend on supports from ordinary citizens, explicitly, during the election period. After getting elected, they hold the ultimate authority and legitimate power. In the age of traditional media, one-to-one interaction between grassroots citizens and political leaders was almost impossible as two groups belonged to two different and distant political poles. Digital media, however, bridged this gap. In such circumstances, political leaders have to be more responsible regarding their actions because ordinary citizens as netizens now have the power to question their (politicians) actions.

Responsiveness is another essential factor in online interaction. The degree of interaction increases when political leaders respond to ordinary users' inquiries (Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2018). Before the 11th Jatiya Sangsad Election 2018, Bangladesh's digital public sphere was populated by the presence of political figures as support-seekers. In practice, every election activates and brings politicians closer to the public to seek votes from the grassroots citizens who are the primary source of power in a democracy.

The former picture of the electoral campaign has been transformed in the digital age, so do the political activism of the nominees. Since grassroots citizens have become netizens, many political leaders

have to embrace the online platform to reach their potential voters. Politicians in digital media not only before the election but also throughout the years trying to reconstruct self-image and party reputation. By doing so, through “identification,” they tend to make the public feel that they (politicians) are empathetic regarding public sufferings (Griffin, 2011).

4.2 Political activists as first-degree supporters

The second key player in Bangladesh’s political sphere is the political activists, whose position in the power structure is between the political leaders and grassroots citizens. The most extraordinary feature of this group is, as first-degree supporters, they are neither the leaders as ultimate powerholder nor the grassroots voters as game-changers. Instead, they emerge from the grassroots level and work for the party members to gain some power and privileges. These dedicated people are the most useful weapon for party leaders in any political movements and incidents.

Dahl (1970) found out two types of power-seekers one gains power while another seeks power. All the political activists may not have the ability to obtain and, thereafter, exercise political power. However, some of them may be promoted from power-seekers to leaders by gaining some control, while others remain in the prior position. Political participation of these political activists in digital media is distinguishable. They only uphold and circulate certain political beliefs according to the ideology and identity of their patrons. The activists of both AL and BNP, two major contending parties in the General Election of 2018, played important roles in disseminating and constructing a positive image of the parties and leaders.

After receiving orders and directions from the top, political activists accomplish the given tasks. According to individual performances, they either get benefits or disdains. The two major political student wings are Bangladesh Chhatra League (BSL) of AL and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) of BNP. All of them were seen hyper-active in SNSs during the election period and conducted their intensive campaign in support of their parties and leaders. Political activists, unlike the other two entities in political stratum, participate in political discourse uniquely. Because of their smaller number than the grassroots citizens, it is easier for them to be unified

even in digital media and organize political campaigns in favor of their parties. Instructed by the political superior known as *bhai*, they engage in political reasoning to champion and preserve party identity and positive image. Since political leaders are the umbrellas of these activists, therefore, a wonderful and effective political patron-client relationship between these two strata is seen in Bangladesh.

In such dyadic political exchange and relationship of patronage, an individual with a superior political position (patron) uses his power and possessions to protect and welfare of the individual from lower-status (client), who provide service, support, and assistance to the patron (Scott, 1972). Clients as political activists instructed by their patrons as party leaders perform well in digital space to accumulate more support for the party. These intermediary political men are addressed as “local strongmen.” They simultaneously act as direct clients of political leaders and the primary patron of the local citizens (Barcson, 2015).

4.3 Grassroots citizens as key players

In the political structure, grassroots citizens are situated at the bottom in terms of power and privilege. However, they are the key player in the democratic system as grassroots citizens constitute the largest share of the total electoral college. Usually, they do not have explicit engagement or association with any political parties. Nevertheless, many grassroots citizens in Bangladesh often hereditarily bear their familial affinity to certain political parties. Grassroots citizens’ communication and participation in politics and the electoral process are unique than the previous two entities. Members belong to this group seek such leaders who would be more beneficial in the future for them. Consequently, they calculate and act according to their gain.

Considering the electoral process of Bangladesh, public as voters can be divided into three categories: (a) support groups, who are dedicated supporters of a candidate and/or party that they are supporting now and will support in future; (b) opposition groups, who always oppose the candidate and/or party no matter what; and (c) swing groups, who are neither supportive nor opposing, rather dwindle with the situation (Cox & McCubbins, 1986). More

often, citizens are blamed for not having enough political knowledge and skill regarding politics, and rather they always seek to fulfill their self-interest. Citizens initiate political discourses in digital media to criticize/appreciate and/or change policy and decisions. In choosing representatives, voters seek famous politicians or act in favor of the popularity of the politicians. They are also influenced by their peers and act upon that (Heywood, 2002). Political leaders want to appease the public mind virtually often by being dramatic. Even they deploy political activists to achieve the trust of grassroots citizens.

Besides, grassroots citizens establish direct interplay with both support-seekers and first-degree supporters in cyberspace. Through careful examination, discourse, and cause-effect analysis, they tend to choose suitable leaders and parties. Before the General Election in 2018, citizens randomly formulated political discourses on issues to explore the pros-and-cons and probabilities of each party and political figure. However, the recently enacted Digital Security Act 2018, as believed by many, might curb the freedom of speech in political communication (“Bangladesh: New Law,” 2018). What usually happens in such adverse circumstances is the rise of alternative criticism. In Bangladesh, after the attribution of regulations on digital media, online dwellers have been using troll and sarcasm as the language of denial and disapproval of policy and politicians. Online political disputes help to de/reconstruct public opinions that have been a great promise in Bangladesh’s political communication.

5. Digital Divide and Apolitical Stratum

The digital divide indicates the differences between *haves* and *have-nots* in terms of accessing digital services. A range of factors can cause the digital divide, such as education, income, social status, information, and literacy (Warschauer, 2004). The digital divide has three categories: (a) global divide refers to the divergence of internet access between industrialized and developing or underdeveloped countries; (b) social divide suggests the usability and gap between rich and poor or educated and uneducated in every country; and (c) democratic divide indicates the difference between those who do and do not use the panoply of digital resources to engage,

mobilize and participate in public life (Norris, 2001). The digital divide in Bangladesh is mainly due to the social divide. Uneven educational status and economic distribution let a vast number of people remain in the periphery, where access to digital media or political participation is, to a certain degree, difficult. On the other hand, the consumption trend between urban and rural in Bangladesh is also different. The urban community is the prime consumer of modern goods and services while the rural people are not. Thus, a considerable number of people in Bangladesh might be separated from digital political communication and confined into the apolitical stratum to date (Islam & Tsuji, 2011; “Unsettling the Digital Divide,” 2015). This apolitical group lacks political knowledge, information, and skill to influence policy outcomes. They also seem less interested in politics. As a result, the seasonally communicate and participate in political activities, discourses, and events.

6. Conclusion

It seems digital media is going to reconstruct a new-age political public sphere in a developing country like Bangladesh. It might exert a more significant impact on Bangladesh politics and the political environment. It also could promote the quality of the whole political system through equality and clarity by letting various groups involve in policy-discussion. From the 2010s, it has been seen that many people are using the virtual space as a parallel discursive zone. Even mainstream media is losing its battle, although it has been a long-debated issue to date. Some theorists are yet to be convinced that digital media, in one way or another, is minimizing the former appeal of traditional media while others think the opposite (Kim & Johnson, 2007).

Apart from the debate, the current propensity of Bangladesh’s political culture is forecasting that digital media would be a decisive player in national as well as local politics. Providing scopes to various political participants to engage in politics, digital media has also been pluralizing and democratizing politics to a greater degree. Of course, it might reshape politics either by enhancing the quality or creating discontent in the political sphere. Various parties, including government officials, public, politicians, even miscreants, might be enthusiastic to tame as well as harvest this open-

access platform of free speech. Therefore, such political contestation for possession over digital media might gradually render Bangladesh politics toward more complex cataclysm.

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