
Digital Silence and Liberating Stories: During a Student-Driven Movement

Nova Ahmed
North South University
Dhaka, Bangladesh
nova.ahmed@northsouth.edu

Zareen Tasnim
North South University
Dhaka, Bangladesh
zareen.tasnim@northsouth.edu

Jasmine Jones
University of Minnesota
USA
jazzij@umich.edu

ABSTRACT

In August 2018, a student protest initiated in Bangladesh sought justice when two school students were run over by public bus. Student protesters were demonstrating on the street for days until they were physically attacked. Concurrent with the physical attacks, the country experienced a disconnect Internet, restrictions on social media usage, and several high-profile arrests of people speaking about the incidents. These suppressive encounters created what we call a "digital silence." In response, we collected stories from people, which depict their effort to seek out information about the events unfolding and share their perspective of what happened. Through these in-the-moment stories, we see a glimpse of how the information suppression impacted people with varying proximity to the events, including protesters, bystanders, and family members. We also reflect on the benefit of the subtle defiance of storytelling for storytellers in the midst of this social justice effort.

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CCS CONCEPTS

Human-centered computing →
Collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Protest, story, suppression, social justice,
digital silence, student protest,
Bangladesh

1 INTRODUCTION

Technology has influenced our lifestyle in diverse ways – even, the form of suppression. Temporary disconnection of internet or restrictive social media can affect freedom of speech of a community active in digital space. We refer to such imposed barrier as digital silence. We looked at the impact of digital silence on the recent youth driven protest that took place in Bangladesh [7], and how storytelling created pathways towards social justice.

Technology platforms have changed dynamics of youth drive movements where it opens up ways to connect others, disseminate important messages as we have seen during movements towards Arab Springs and Shahbag movement [2, 3, 41]. Live stream communication takes engagement to a new level where one feels connected to the event in real time [27, 28, 29]. Community involvement during critical time is closely observed over digital space after Virginia shooting incident and later, during a natural disaster [24, 25, 26]. Social media, online media and Live Stream turns into sources of information along with its role to connect [24, 25, 26]. Natural instinct to seek information in critical time is supported further using existing tech-platforms. We have seen engagement and dependency over online media, social media and Live Stream reporting recent protest in Bangladesh. General people relied on alternative sources of information where Government sources were considered unreliable [19] and media appeared to be restrictive. This phenomenon of sharing directly impacted from deliberate internet disconnect [30].

Our student driven protest initiated when two school students were run over by a public bus. The bus was competing with other vehicles to collect passengers and at some point it lost control, running over the students waiting to return home. The accident had deeper implications. There are not adequate laws to punish reckless drivers [40] and even if some of them are arrested, there are loop holes to set them free. The responsible minister addressed the death of students with a smile [14] referring to the number of death as low (he later compared it to death of 32 passengers in India in a recent traffic accident). The students who died were from lower income families who dreamed of educated children for better days, for change. The entire country sympathized with the grieving families realizing the broken and corrupt traffic system. The protest was initiated by school students, later parents, teachers, activists, stars, general people and university students joined the cause. The movement was instant and based on emotion seeking justice in terms of safe roads, removal of responsible minister, enforcement of laws

etc. This movement formation and communication was not oriented on technology platform, it was similar to the spirit of Florida school student movement [8, 9] – seeking changes. Students and others were on road for days until they were physically attacked at various points in Dhaka city. There was internet disconnect, restrictive social media usage followed by arrests of activists, students and stars [15, 16, 17]. Researchers initiated in-the-moment story collection as a response to ongoing suppression. Our initial goal was to portray pictures of ongoing activities which is missing (or restricted) from cyberspace.

We have successfully collected stories from families and friends of researchers. There were spontaneous stories, thoughtful ones – all regarding the movement. Some stories were from the ‘eye’ of movement, some were collected away from in varying in context, intensity and reliability. It was difficult to extrapolate missing pieces of events from stories. However, we were able to identify why and where people relied on stories out of uncertainty and assumptions. Stories were ways to express feelings that would be not be shared otherwise. We have seen how online-presence influences youth drive protests. This work presents an opportunity to consider stories used as medium, during digital silence as a form of suppression. The question answered was whether stories could break the externally imposed silence. Our research shows that the voice to seek social justice is not easily shut down.

2 RELATED WORK

We discuss about student movements, traffic conditions in Bangladesh followed by the policy concerns in following subsections.

Portraying Time: Representation of time from technology access points is discussed with great rigor by Lindley [22]. Technology has given a new dimension to time as discussed in the work and people are experiencing fast moving busy lives with a feeling mentioned as *nowness*. Digital experiences have influenced lives in how time experiences are perceived, there are filler times referred as *plastic time* [23]. The work portrays time in innovative way to meet the new technology-era. In our work, we focus on a period of time through stories presented in digital artifact.

Challenging Time and Events: *Virginia* Tech shooting incident that took place in 2007 in campus where 32 people were instantly killed, presents role of technology in a crisis scenario [26]. Viewg et al. considered various online interactions including Flickr, Wikipedia (English), Facebook, Myspace, Orkut and Secondlife. There was anticipation of spreading rumors and inaccurate information during and after the event. However, once intensity of the tragedy was confirmed, a sense of community was formed that supported each other. Palen et al. [24] present the role of technology as a communication medium in crisis scenario. The work refers to natural tendency of people to seek information from close and extended circles in critical situations referring from work on disaster from 1970s by Drabek et al. [25]. This work present how support system revolves around disaster scenario.

We have been inspired by the concept of time and region representation around disaster scenario and considered exploration of such impact during student protest. However, there was no direct relationship on proximity to influence communication in our findings. The differences may have occurred due to the nature of incident which is more of a movement over time rather than a particular disaster that has immediate impact.

FamilyID	Location	Participant	Age	Gender&Relationship
Family1	Dhanmondi,Dhaka	P1	34	Female Made
		P2	28	Male Caretaker
		P3	35	Male Cleaner
		P4	55	Male Guard
		P5	60	Female Mother
		P6	65	Male Father
		P7	23	Female Daughter
Family2	Mohammadpur,Dhaka	P8	35	Female Wife
		P9	41	Male Husband
		P10	58	Female Mother InLaw P9
Family3	Dhanmondi,Dhaka	P11	54	Female Mother of P9
		P12	57	Female Mother InLaw P9
Family4	Banani,Dhaka	P13	46	Male Father
		P14	13	Female Daughter
Family5	Chittagong	P15	47	Female Aunt P13
		P16	68	Female Mother P13
		P17	15	Male Nephew P13

Figure 1. List of Family Participants

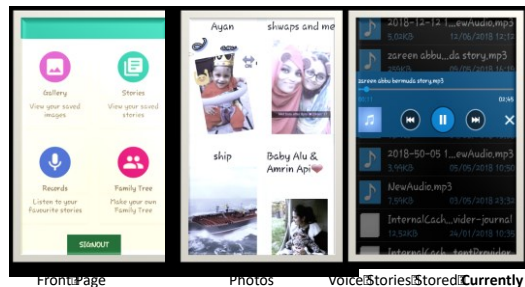


Figure 2. Story collection interface

Livestreaming of Information: Haimson et al. [27] explores features that are exclusive in Live event sharing as found in Facebook Live, Periscope and Snapchat. It provides great examples of events where Facebook Live was used to show what happened after Police shot Philandro Castille; followed by a person climbing Trump Tower that had many live viewers. The research explores that Live sharing must be designed for mass people rather than individuals and it lacks interactivity from other means of communication. User’s perception on observing Live Streams have explored desirable parameters as reported by Mostafa et al. [28]. There are requirements to provide multiple streams that enable different viewpoints, possible ways to traverse back through the stream to ensure user does not miss previous events and ability to visualize user’s activities. Ways to stream events from different users are designed, developed and tested by researchers [29] who have referred it as *crowdcast*. It shows the growing interest in Live Stream sharing. In our study, some participants shared stories, experiences from Facebook Live. At the same time, there was a celebrity who was arrested sharing un-verified information on Facebook Live –talking about death of students. We have discussed this incident in our background section.

Storytelling, Sharing and Technology: Family storytelling is considered as a platform that connects family members building connections through collective memory [42]. Storytelling as an interaction creates a sense of belonging among participants [43]. Our study uses storytelling in a stressful time where one needs to share the feelings that could not be done otherwise. Technology efforts are considered for storytelling and connectivity from diverse aspects: family integration is considered for families living apart [44, 48]; storyteller as a primary focus [45, 47]; personal stories for public presentation; storytelling giving voices to marginal groups [46]. Our work uses a simple application to preserve stories in ways that can be stored, shared and preserved among family members similar to a photo album.

3 METHODOLOGY

We present information about stories, storytellers, listeners and story collection procedure in details here.

Method: We had storytellers and listeners based on personal connections. Storytellers were directly known to the listeners as family members, extended family members or friends (Figure 1). Family members among storytellers had unique positions during the incident – some were directly involved (e.g., as a student, as a teacher, as a parent, being present during protest etc.); some were affected indirectly through the ongoing unrest. We had five families and eight individuals participating as storytellers (four male and four female). Stories were collected on the week followed by the protest. We had open ended queries about what happened during the incident and how one felt during that time. Most of the stories were around 3 minutes long while the longest one was 11 minutes long and shortest one was 20 seconds long. Total story recording time was close to two hours. Story topics were around the protest ranging from personal experiences, feelings, chronological descriptions etc. Some storytellers added personal details which we have excluded in the paper to preserve their privacy.

Well. For us it started on Monday. It was a normal Monday until we heard 3 / 4 students have been run over by a bus. At that time, it did not look serious, we took a different route (on school bus). We thought it would be over. May be they would cancel school for a day. School was closed for an entire week. For the last three days of the next week, Govt. sent a message to all the schools to open them up. Apparently, it was safe. Schools had to send list of students to Govt. Govt. was trying to say it was safe, but it wasn't. Damage was greater. Students were out on road. Roads were blocked. At first that was it. They wanted justice. They wanted safer roads. Wanted to replace minister who wasn't doing his job. Everyone deserves justice. Its their right. Human right. For 2 days students were bitten up by police. No one was allowed to say anything against Police or Govt. They ended up getting hurt. No one was allowed to say anything about Govt. All media, all newspaper. No one said stories honestly. She knew what was going on. 50 students were taken and tortured for protesting. My aunt said, her mother would not believe her. Her mom only got news from media. I know this, because one of my aunt is in AUST. She came to Dhaka from Chittagong to complete her education. Things happened in her University. My father had to go out and rescue her. In Dhaka, all was on pause. Roads were not safe. Outside Dhaka, apparently everyone was normal, barely even a protest. Some tried to protest, when the saw Police, they got scared. Dhaka was isolated. We aren't completely sure, for couple of hours internet was shut down. Nor sure, if it was on purpose.

- (a) Story collected from student, female, Age 12-15, Dhaka, experienced turmoil, heard from family

I was worried about you. Worried about my grandchildren. I had a feelings that something bad would happen. It was like the protest during 1952 student protest. It felt like a war. I was in front of the TV all day. Read everything that was on news paper. I was thinking and worried. These are just kids. School children were taken, what was going on? What really happened to them? What happened to their parents?

- (b) Story from elderly member, female, Age 60+, Chittagong, learned from news

We agree to the cause of this protest. Our Prime Minister also agrees. Kids were on the road for 2/3 days. Prime minister mentioned that she lost all her family members, she agreed to help the students. But still students did not listen. Probably jamat or BNP were with them.

- (c) Story from Political leader, female, Age 50+, Chittagong, Heard from family member, news

Police threw tear shells in Dhanmondi Road number 2. We could not stay there in peace. Garage was full of fumes. We had to leave a place immediately. At last I covered my face with towel when I was guarding the house.

- (d) Security Guard experiencing tear gas, Male, 50, Dhaka

While I was rushing out, I saw two Police jumped over a student. I was first confused whether Police were attacking students or other bad people. Later when I reached home, I found out that Police attacked students seeing all the Facebook posts. For the first time in my life I saw Police attack with sticks. I thought it was created by media and cameras for terrifying people. I never thought Police would target students. Students were doing it (protest) peacefully. They were not there with the intention to create violence. Trust me it was damn terrifying for me!

- (e) Story from professional, Male, Age 30, Female, Dhaka

I saw students stopped the Ministers car. They checked for license and driver's one had expired. They did not allow him to run the car.

- (f) Story from a cleaner, Male, Age 40, Dhaka

We did not conduct follow up questions after the recording was over. However, in certain cases, follow up conversations rotated around protest, injustice or simply, politics.

We had two listeners, both were female of different age groups. There were five families where family members shared their stories and few stories from friends of the listeners. There were eight individual stories from students who are friends of the younger listener (student). We had total 25 storytellers and collected 40 stories. The interview locations are shown in Appendix, Figure A1. We collected stories from Dhaka and Chittagong – two different Storytellers were contacted through known connections directly, without any phone call or emails. All the stories were recorded on local devices without any cloud or internet based connectivity. This was to protect the stories, story tellers and listeners. There were complaints from students that some of their personal social media profiles were being observed.

Participants were informed of the research. Some of them were familiar with the story collection process. Majority of the stories were collected in Bangla except two storytellers who preferred to share them in English. There was no monetary incentive for the storytellers and the participation was entirely voluntary.

Story Collection: We have used a custom designed story collection application that allows us to collect stories, photos corresponding to stories and family connections among storytellers [50] as can be seen in Figure 2. We have only used the voice based story collection feature of the application.

4 FINDINGS

We have explored different dimensions of collected stories in following subsections.

Collected Stories: We have four categories of storytellers: a. protestors; b. People present in the protest, c. People who viewed real time events through video stream (e.g., Facebook Live) which is real time but limited and finally d. People who learned the stories from other sources (talk show, relatives, social media posts etc.). Selected stories are presented in Figure 3. Some stories have been shortened or partially presented to preserve storyteller's anonymity.

Access to Information: In general, we have printed and visual media sources from various agencies in Bangladesh along with online news media, social media as news sources. Government news channels lack reliability among general people [19]. Social media was referred as a source to spread rumors by Information Minister [32]. Social media based misinformation has been used to manipulate public emotion in negative ways previously [21].

However, social media remained as a popular source of news until it was disconnected [30]. There was *physical disconnection* from internet as presented here:

“Internet and phone lines were disconnected for few hours in Dhaka” Female, Dhaka

Media and social media restriction had disconnected the regions outside Dhaka in terms of information sharing:

“We did not have internet for two days. There was no way of knowing what is really going on” Female, Chittagong.

A participant was looking for news from local (e.g., Azadi) and nationwide newspapers (e.g., Prothom Alo) and TV channels:

“I was reading news from Azadi, Prothom- Alo and TV. But I did not know what was going on.”

Figure 3. Selected stories

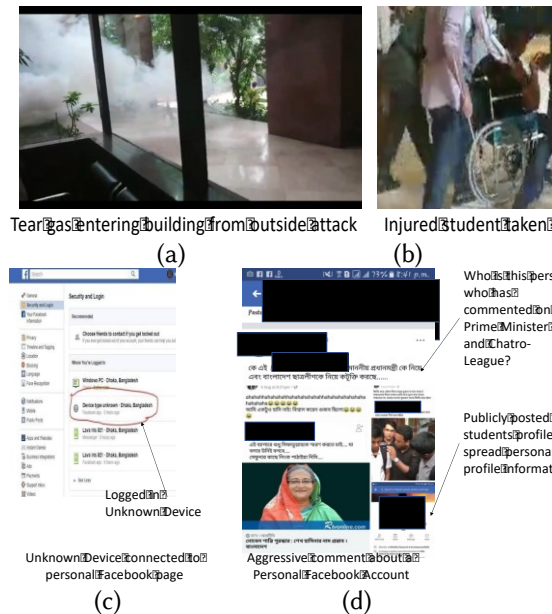


Figure 4. (a) Tear gas and injured student (b) Injured person on wheel chair for First Aid (c) Device connected to social media account, (d) Aggressive comment on Personal Facebook Account

The disconnection developed, assumptions and concerns among general people. There was dissatisfaction with every level of information anticipating worse conditions than what is being presented.

Experience of Suppression: Students and activists were arrested right after the protest. It created a situation where many were experiencing feelings of suppression. Some key experiences are shown in Figure 4 (a) to (d) showing chaos, injured students, unknown device connected to Facebook account and humiliation of a student on public Facebook page respectively. *Personal experiences* explored the peaceful side of the protest during its initiation. One woman shared her observation when she went out for a doctor’s appointment as follows:

“There were huge number of students on the road. They maintained traffic lines on the road. They were controlling traffic. They were helping old people to cross the road. A beautiful example from future generation”-Female, Dhaka

Similar experiences were shared:

“The students stopped the car which broke law e.g., went on wrong lanes. They spoke respectfully with senior citizens.”
Male, Dhaka

Other stories captured direct experiences of many participants who were present as protestors or observers. One student shared his experience of being hurt:

“It was around 4:30 in the afternoon. I was supporting the student protest and went near ghatpara. All of a sudden, Police came with others. They threw tear shells on us. We got panicked. When they understood that we were adamant and would continue the protest, they threw pebbles on us. I got hit by one of the large ones. Today after 9 days of the incident – I came to Apolo hospital to cut my stitches”- Male, Dhaka

Emotions of escaping from the situation rather than helping a person in need was present. A story showed feelings of guilt and efforts justifying the decisions.

“I was standing in the crowd and there was one senior brother from my university. A police asked him to show his ID card, when he showed his ID card – the police started to beat him up severely. I immediate ran away from that area”-Male, Dhaka.

Personal experiences regarding abuse were shared:

“I was videotaping the incidents from our building. One attacker who had stick in his hand saw me and showed me the stick. I was so scared that I hid in the house for a while”- Male, Caretaker, Age 30-40, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

A school student shared her views that reflected direct experience as well as experience that she heard from her aunt as presented in Figure 2(a).

Indirect stories used information from news media, social media or verbal conversations. These stories include attacks, violence without verification of information. One shared story was received from family member while the other ones from social media:

“During the protest, when the police shot a rubber bullet, he (a student protestor) got shot in one of his eyes”- Female, Dhaka.
“A senior of mine got shot by rubber bullet. He got injury in his eyes. But the news did not get that much viral as that of other news from injured students” – Male, Dhaka

Indirect story sharing was a source of confusion; particularly, when there was media restriction. There were stories that included physical protest, attacks, experiences of what was going on in the protest and experiences from various sources such as family members.

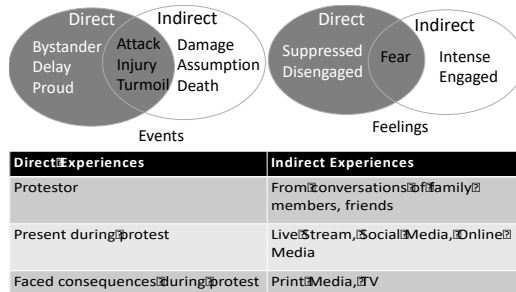


Figure 5. Contrast of Direct and Indirect Experiences

It was a common practice to videotape ongoing interesting activities. However, photo journalists and general people were attacked deliberately during videotaping protest [16].

Analysis: It was an effort to juxtapose direct stories and indirect ones. Summary of our findings are shown in Figure 5. A sense of *intimidation and fear* was present in certain indirect stories:

“His name was Akib. The younger son of the family. His father passed away when he was younger and mother had to take responsibility. Mother sold all their lands for education of her children. His mother admitted him to a private university for his education. Akib joined the student protest. He was badly beaten by police and men from ruling clique such that he got Brain Hemorrhage. He was injured and was unconscious.” –Female, Dhaka

Misinformation from Live Streaming Events, Facebook etc. were present. Storytellers have reported information sources such as TV talk shows (very popular in Bangladesh); Live presence in social:

“I witnessed the scenarios on Facebook and went to depression for days”- Female, Dhaka

Storytellers considered Facebook LIVE contents:

“During protest, I was on social media and noticed that a man went LIVE and urged people to gather in Bashundhara gate. The man drew attention of people by asking everyone to look at their conditions. At first he claimed rubber bullet attacks then he said it was tear shell attacks”-Female, Dhaka

Reports from talk show was also discussed by storytellers and mentioned as direct experiences:

“A student leader named Tushar Noon came to a talk show. He claimed that the men from ruling clique did not attack but the goons did attack” – Female, Dhaka

Facebook Live streaming was present as an important source of information. A movie star came to Facebook Live who mentioned about several students being killed and referred to one student who lost his eyes. She was arrested and prosecuted under ICT law 57 for spreading rumors. She was in Police custody for several days who later mentioned that she was not a direct witness [17].

Disconnection initiated *assumptions, aggravated rumors*. No one was satisfied with media information – there was assumptions of higher level of damage since the media was restricted.

“It was really appreciating. The students came out of their comfort zone and asked for justice. Two students were killed in road mishap. Actually, not 2, the number remain beyond our, Housewife, Age 50-60, Dhanmondi.

Sometimes it is not a number but a vague idea of having a large number of casualties:

“I do not know the details – just know that many- many students died in Dhaka” – Male, Chittagong

Assumptions about actions were referred by storytellers with confidence:

“I saw many students swam and crossed the Dhanmondi lake from the opposite side. They were beaten by police and had to jump the lake to escape.”-Male, Cleaner, Age 40-50, Dhaka

Rumors were greatly referred by social media and media. There was confusion about rumors themselves. *Physical proximity from the incident* did not have any significant impact on indirect stories. However, logical proximity from the information source had influence on storytellers.

List of Terminologies used in Paper

BCL	Bangladesh Chatra League, Student organization of ruling political party
Chatra League	Student organization of ruling political party
ICT Act	An act to protect online safety [31]
Azadi, Prothom Alo	Azadi: Local newspaper of Chittagong, privately owned; Prothom Alo: Nationwide newspaper, privately owned.
Dhanmondi	A region in Dhaka Shown in Fig A1, it was a place where school students were attacked
Banani	A region in Dhaka Shown in Fig A1, close to the incident where accident occurred
Bashundhara	A region in Dhaka Shown in Fig A1, it was a place where university students were attacked
Jamat	A religiously motivated political party.
BNP	Political party that was in power prior to current Government. They tied up with Jamat in previously.
AUST	Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology

5 DISCUSSION

Stories are enablers in diverse ways.

Stories to Liberate: Short term digital silence followed by restricted media usage created a sense of fear. It worked as a barrier to share feelings, information or queries on digital media. *Story listeners* (researchers) collected stories as part of sympathizing with protestors. Story collection worked as a subtle way of being part of the movement. *Storytellers* had emotional expressions. One storyteller changed the story three times not knowing where to start and what to share. In all cases, once a story started, it went on spontaneously. There were volunteer storytellers who shared updates, news feeds, photos and other information along with stories. Sincere support from participants showed how stories were important to break the silence. Breaking silence is difficult when the experience is negative or personal [18, 37]. Once, one is able to cross the initial hesitation, one can liberate from sharing. We have seen such liberation through practices [38] and research efforts [2, 3, 18, 37].

Stories creating Connections: At the end of the discussion, we consider the question of what the stories represent holistically: time, place or event. Stories are able to create a chronological view as we have seen in previous research. Stories here, presented *personal impact* rather than framing the true picture of events. There are concerns about older stories on how events may change over the course of time, how stories flow from person to person [39]. In-the-moment stories are different in nature from that perspective. However, our stories had pieces that came from various sources – direct and indirect ones. We had stories from direct experiences, general media, digital media, personal contacts and more. Every story had storyteller’s perspectives; some added adjectives to dramatize it; some had level of disengagement. Digital-silence artificially generated an urge to seek information from various sources which is a common phenomenon during challenging time [24, 25, 26]. In our scenario, we had anticipations of what might had happened. We did not see how rumors or false stories were generated but we could clearly feel how every story was considered as a source of information. Challenging scenario handling using digital media is studied carefully in recent years [24, 25, 26]. These scenarios include natural disasters and manmade disasters. During a natural disaster community works together creating a circle of support.

Manmade disaster such as Virginia school shooting, had a state of anticipation until the incident was clearly stated to public. Community worked coherently in similar manner to support each other and comforting the impacted ones. A protest is similar in the manner how people are impacted, connected and generates support [24, 25, 26] when social media presence is considered. In the current scenario, digital media, social media, Live streams turned out as an alternative source of information unlike a platform to organize a movement. The forced disconnection created connectivity through stories. “*An unknown school student who was beaten up*” as a story from a completely unknown source created a thread of connection to someone who sympathized. This is a phenomenon how people connect beyond physical boundaries during suppression, seeking social justice [2, 3].

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