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The Digital IRL: Influence as Resistance in Post- Pandemic Sri Lanka

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Doctor of Philosophy

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I, Craig Ryder, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This study is based on 18 months of fieldwork with Sri Lankans who use social media for resistance. On the one hand, the monograph considers the ethnographic tensions that emerge in the encounter between being a highly visible Sri Lankan activist on social media in a media sphere notorious for its restriction of media freedoms, the proliferation of disinformation, and state-sponsored violence against dissenters. On the other hand, it probes the lure and demands of widespread influencer culture on social media and how the accumulation and exchange of influence affects and contributes to how activists politically participate. The term 'information influencer' is introduced to bridge these tensions and make a departure from the overused and ambiguous concept of digital activist.

In addition, the monograph offers a conceptual way of seeing social media influence through the prism of 'digital capital'. By advancing Bourdieu's notion of capital and rewiring it for the digital era, digital capital is defined as the highly visible datafication of social media users' follower count and is shown to be the primary affordance of social media activity. The information influencers studied have amassed considerable stockpiles of digital capital which has conflicting consequences, attracting surveillance, hackers and trolls on social media, plus fame and opportunities in real life (IRL).

The study is also a demonstration of the methodological challenge of doing ethnography through a pandemic and devising novel solutions to unprecedented problems. The outcome, 'augmented ethnography', is a patchwork approach combining datafied, digital and in person modalities for a deeper understanding of the complexity of a social world organised by data, presented through a screen, and experienced in the body. The

commonplace distinction made between the online and offline worlds is contested through the augmented approach and the six chapters that comprise the independent dimensions of the study: 1) media, 2) people, 3) data, 4) platforms, 5) place, and 6) practice. Presented under the titular *The Digital IRL*, the monograph emphasises the collapse of the faux binary between online practice and place, and life offline.

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Preface

The thing about social media is that everyone is at it. You, me, she, he, they and them; we're all posting content to imagined audiences, manicuring profile pages, liking the selfie of a high-profile celebrity or traversing the followers' list of a new friend. I wonder what your social media experience has been like – glorious, alienating, indifferent maybe? I wonder if you think, overall, the world would be a better place if the Web 2.0 era hadn't kicked off back in the mid-noughties?

Right now, as I sit writing in London, the far right is rising across the UK and terrorising black and brown people across the country. The headlines claim that social media is to blame as racist nationalists organise on private Telegram channels and toxic influencers rabble-rouse on TikTok. Of course, the accusation is nonsense given thirteen years of Conservative rule seeding xenophobia in the public sphere, and fascist movements in the UK outdating the widespread internet by three generations.

This study is not about the politics of social media in the UK, but this snapshot is a blueprint the world over. Under examination in my study are the people and practices who use social media for resistance in Sri Lanka. Social media in Sri Lanka has been regularly held responsible for a raft of conflicting matters, including anti-Muslim riots and anti-government protests. In moments of crisis, the government has even pulled the plug on social media access altogether.

The pervasiveness of social media here and there is overwhelming. My goal is not to convince you that social media is some force for good or bad. The tired utopian/dystopian debates of yesteryear are unnuanced and unhelpful when dealing with a social phenomenon so paradoxical.

Moreover, for most ordinary social media users, probably users like you and me, social media is simply not that profound. It *hasn't* radicalised. It doesn't *emancipate*.

This project aims to enrich our understanding of social media. Over 5 billion people worldwide are social media users, and I have carved out a small slice to get to know and present my findings. One of the great things about spending time with Sri Lankans who use social media with incredible verve and ambition is that it inspired me to reflect on the potential of my own social media usage. Perhaps a small ambition of mine, then, is to inspire you, the next time you instinctively open your favourite app, to think about the potential at your fingertips.

INTRODUCTION: Information Influencers, Digital Capital & Augmented Ethnography

1.1 | Introduction

Ama¹ and I go way back, long before the ethnographic fieldwork that this study is based on, so perhaps it is fitting to begin with a snippet of her life story. Between 2017-18, we worked as journalists in a Sri Lankan media startup renowned for its upstart energy. Ama managed the company's Twitter² account as she had a significant personal following already and understood what practices and tactics attract engagement and accumulate social media followers. Beginning in Hollywood, the hashtag #MeToo movement was exploding around the world, exposing decades of misogyny and patriarchal abuse across various sectors and industries. Having witnessed years of toxic abuse against her colleagues in the creative industries, in 2021, Ama took it upon herself to bring #MeToo to Sri Lanka.

Harnessing her personal Twitter account, Ama made a 'thread' and described the various forms of physical, sexual and cyber abuse women she knew in the local media industry had suffered. Due to fear of retribution, she did not name the perpetrators but hinted at the identities of numerous high-profile editors and senior media operators in Colombo.

¹ The names of my research participants have been pseudonymised to protect their privacy. The names of discernible public figures such as Elon Musk, various politicians, and the leader of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), Wasantha, have not been changed.

² In October 2022, one year into my fieldwork, the world's richest man, Elon Musk, acquired Twitter, and in July 2023, the platform was controversially rebranded as 'X'. The name change has been poorly received and most users continue to refer to 'X' as 'Twitter'. Following the popular parlance of my research participants, I use 'Twitter' throughout.

Legacy media, so entrenched in the egregious system, had seldom reported on sexual harassment in the workplace, but in this moment, social media seemed to be offering female emancipation by bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of information and morality.

Despite the revelations at the time, nothing much has changed since. No notable abusers lost their job, and chauvinism continues to dominate the media sphere. One major outcome was in Ama's career as she found it increasingly hard to obtain work as editors and seniors who were indirectly implicated in the stories refused to employ her.

Still, she suspects, it was worth it. Her courage had seemingly earned Ama influence (and notoriety), and her number of Twitter followers snowballed, helpfully connecting her to international feminist and LGBT networks, but also into the crosshairs of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists, incels and other groups she'd have preferred to avoid. Subsequently, Ama obtained an international scholarship and moved to Europe to study. Now settled abroad, with one critical eye firmly on Sri Lanka, and her finger on the 'tweet' button, she continues to use Twitter to fight for accountability and justice for people suffering ethnic or gender-based violence at the hands of the powerful.

This monograph deals with the widespread proliferation of social media in Sri Lanka and the rise of what I call 'information influencers' like Ama. It tries to find out how citizens use social media platforms for political participation, especially to fight for minority and women's issues, and why these Sri Lankans resist the temptations of *traditional* social media influencer culture whilst seemingly risking structural and physical violence from a Sinhala-Buddhist state renowned for its heavy-handedness towards dissidents and minority groups. In recent years, people from across the island's diverse ethnicity-mix have taken on the mantle of

questioning state policies, calling out harassment and resisting fake news. Although Sri Lanka has a highly literate population and a lively media sphere, professional journalism and freedom of expression have been severely curtailed by the murder and disappearances of tens of high-profile journalists during the 26-year civil war that (officially) ended in May 2009. Information influencers are a new designation since then; sometimes they maintain or have had affiliations to traditional posts in old media houses, but most act autonomously and with a revolutionary spirit, seeing social media as a lifeline for enforcing political change.

Beyond neat alliteration, the framing of the term information influencers is instructive because it unifies two significant elements of the ongoing 'platformisation of cultural production' process (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg, 2022). The first is the question mark over the reliability of news and information since the onset of the so-called 'post-truth' era in 2016. The digitalisation of news production and the symbiotic 24/7 availability of news and media via digital technology, plus the firebrand politics of Donald Trump and his accusations of fake news against the traditional media sphere during his first presidential campaign, have put the legitimacy of information in contemporary society under increasing scrutiny (Farkas & Schou, 2019). In addition, media scholarship has been impacted by the post-structuralist turn that recognises normatively stable entities such as knowledge and truth as socially constructed and prone to 'context collapse' (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In the case of Sri Lanka, information is a highly contested commodity as the government has routinely enforced draconian policies and violently pursued journalists to control media freedoms and historical narratives (Crawley, et al. 2015). For example, the number of civilian casualties from the bloody civil war between the Sri Lankan state, largely motivated by Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist ideology, and the Hindu Tamil separatists otherwise known as the LTTE or Tamil Tigers, is still unknown, despite UN investigations

continuing, inhibiting the pursuit of justice and reconciliation (Weiss, 2011). During my ethnographic fieldwork, one such information influencer with nearly 40,000 Twitter followers showed me how he laboured for several hours every day, separate to his day job in commercial social media brand management and marketing—and therefore for no financial remuneration—to research and disseminate information (in the form of tweets) that called out government corruption, reprimanded racist groups and individuals and disproved fake news. When I asked Lahiru, have you considered becoming a professional journalist so you can be paid for the hard work you do? he replied matter-of-factly, ‘Why would I want to be a journalist? Then I wouldn’t be able to say anything’.

The second epochal development installed by platformisation of cultural production is the rise of influencers on social media and their role in radically altering how information is produced, circulated and consumed, because social media users with significant followings, whether existing celebrities, thought leaders in specialised fields or ordinary-citizens-turned tastemakers, have become the arbiters of quality and truth. Like elsewhere globally, lifestyle influencers are a proliferating cohort in Sri Lanka, with various people, normally young and attractive, building significant audiences on social media to advertise products and services. Previously, influencers have been defined as 'ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts' (Abidin, 2015; 1). However, most of the participants of my study are differ from this definition insofar as they refuse brand alignment and the monetisation affordances of social media in favour of political participation and deep entanglements with the quality of information available to their fellow social media users. Nevertheless, information

influencers tend to reproduce influencer tactics to maintain engagement with their followers and their 'imagined audience' (Marwick & boyd, 2011), and they also demonstrate 'folkloric' responses to the social media platforms. MacDonald defines algorithmic lore as a discursive and performative practice that influencers demonstrate to make sense of an opaque social media system and 'how it actually works' (MacDonald, 2023, 1412). For their own self-esteem and sense of progress against a technological black box that has no instruction manual and is prone to sudden shifts in design, function and politics, influencers tend to build their own 'folklore' about how they mastered the algorithm and amassed their impressive following (Bishop, 2019; Savolainen, 2022; see also De Seta, 2024a; De Seta, 2024b). For example, Siri, the youngest information influencer of my study, with close to 15,000 Twitter followers regularly updates her profile pictures to show herself doing community work or on stage with a microphone talking to large crowds (to emphasise her real-world influence), but she strategically makes these changes when she feels she needs to 'increase my algorithm'. Siri's 'algorithmic lore' (Bishop, 2021) is that when she feels her content is under-performing and engagement with her followers is low, she surmises that a selective profile picture update will give 'her' algorithm a necessary boost and grants her content greater visibility to her audience.

How then have researchers previously studied the advent of the social media era and digital culture more broadly? In the exemplary, early internet ethnography, *Life Online*, Annette Markham (1998) showed that the early adopters of internet relay chat rooms (IRC), one of the foundational technologies of social media, were motivated and obsessed with the 'control' that digital communications offers the construction of the self, in contrast to one's identity IRL, which is perceived to be in flux and prone to (mis)interpretation by others. The US college students of Markham's study spent up to twelve hours a day communicating with

strangers in IRC because of the control the technology afforded them. They could control who they communicated with (as the name suggests IRC allows users to create separate rooms to meet and chat), when they communicated (the collapsing of distance allowed users to talk synchronically with people in different time zones and geographies, and how they communicated (users adopted highly discursive jargon and codified text-speak). Not dissimilarly, another landmark study of the era, Sherry Turkle's (1995) *Life On The Screen*, argues that 'we are moving toward a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real' (ibid. 23), frontloading an internet experience that is distinct and therefore *other* to the lives of internet users off the screen. As these two pioneering authors suggest, the anthropological interest of early digital cultures was rooted in representation and how the digital-enabled the development of multiple, alternative selves, marking a clear distinction between the on and offline self, a trope familiar to many of the most enduring science fiction stories of the late twentieth century.

Under the stewardship of Daniel Miller and the UCL school of Digital Anthropology, the study of social media and digital cultures has departed from the structured on/offline binary between sociality that occurs via the internet and relationships and practices deemed *in real life* (IRL) and moved away from a focus on US-based internet users. In possibly the first study of digital communications in a Global South setting, Miller's ethnography on early internet usage on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad argues that 'email communications or websites were experienced as comparatively concrete and mundane enactments of belonging, rather than virtual,' adding, 'that is to say, these spaces are important as *part* of everyday life, not apart from it'. (Miller & Slater, 2000, 7, their italics) Years later, Miller crystalized this inchoate observation and laid out six principles for the emergent subfield of digital anthropology, writing, 'humanity is not

one iota more mediated by the rise of the digital" (Miller & Horst, 2012, 3), implying that people have always been wholly and persistently mediated, whether by witchcraft or websites, and that cultural phenomena, indigenous or digital, is a mediating force that shapes, reinforces and subverts an individual subjective experience. In sociological Goffmanian terms, digital anthropologists accept that all social interactions, whether online or IRL, are framed through an invisible lens that determines what behaviours are applicable, and the different personas and communication schemas we deploy in specific spaces and for specific audiences. Another important proposition in the contemporary study of social media is affordance theory; a term originally coined by ecological psychologist James J. Gibson to describe the specific outcomes a non-sentient thing allows its sentient interlocutor, or in other words, 'what things furnish, either for good or ill' (Gibson, 1969, 285). Madianou and Miller's (2012) application of affordance theory to the social technologies that enable long-distance relationships between Filipino migrant mothers and their families back home demonstrates that the technology a family choose to communicate with is highly dependent on the sociocultural parenting duties and contexts. Filipino mothers opt for faceless communications such as text messages or ordinary telephone calls to deliver bad news or scolding, but video-enabled messaging services such as webcams are preferred to mediate teaching and celebrations, demonstrating the contingent morality of technological affordances. Polymedia therefore situates the digital media we choose to communicate through as not only based on what a tool functionally affords but also are determined by a range of emotional and material conditions.

The digital anthropologists of the 'Why We Post' project (Miller, et al. 2016), a collaborative effort by nine researchers conducting fifteen months of fieldwork around social media practices in nine different countries, argue that before social media there were two types of mediated

communications: public broadcasting media such as tv and radio where a producer could reach a broad range of people but the precise individuals were unknown, and private, intimate 1-2-1 conversations using telephonic communications. Early digital communications such as email, bulletin boards and the IRC of Markham's study revolutionised what was possible communicatively by allowing for group conversations, creating a third mode of 'polylogical' interactions; that is neither monological nor dialogical, but directly involving three or more interlocuters. The coalition of nine digital anthropologists, thus, define social media as, 'the colonisation of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy that we have termed 'scalable sociality.' (Miller, et al. 2016; 206) Ever since a South Korean social networking site called CyWorld was released in 1999—widely cited as the first social media platform as we know today (boyd & Ellison, 2008)—the scalability of social medias worldwide has been profound and swift. The largest US platform, Facebook, has 3 billion worldwide users and WeChat, the largest platform in China, has appropriately 1.3 billion users, signalling that most of the world's adult population has some sort of engagement with either platform (Statista, 2024a; 2024b). While the usership of Facebook is near-ubiquitous in Sri Lanka, the primary focus on my study is Twitter, a less numerically popular but politically important platform. Released out of Silicon Valley in 2006, one the conspicuous distinctions between Twitter and Facebook is how Twitter affords users the opportunity to accrue new followers, not bilaterally connect with old friends. 'Scalable sociality' therefore refers to the way social medias potentially enable users to scale conversations from private to public and from small audiences to large ones (and vice versa) very quickly. Via the dimension of polymedia, Facebook's affordances meant it evolved to become a platform for mediated communications with people users have established

relationships with IRL, while Twitter became a site to develop public influence in a wider, global community.

The reason why Twitter became the primary site of my study is because of the unique role it plays in the circulation of information in the Sri Lankan media sphere. According to Bennet and Thomas (2014), the kickstart to Twitter's global reputation as the most important platform for news, gossip and up-to-date information happened in 2008 following two political events in USA and India, respectively. Barack Obama made innovative use of Twitter in his rise to US presidency, allowing for dialogic communication between a politician and the electoral for the first time, providing followers with a backstage pass into the man vying to lead the world's most powerful country. In Mumbai, the terrorist attacks of November 2008 were broadcast synchronically on Twitter and helped build the platform's 'status as an influential and important new form of citizen journalism, allowing networked, dialogic and eye-witness accounts of the tragedy to unfold in real time' (Bennet and Thomas, 2014, 501). Following these two very different but important events that showcased the invaluable affordances of Twitter, first as a site for the powerful to demonstrate influence and portray intimacy, and second, as a venue for grassroots news reportage, Twitter grew from a niche userbase of 1 million people to over 18 million by 2009 (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In Sri Lanka, Twitter did not become popular until almost ten years later but like in the USA and India before, it was important political interventions IRL that established Twitter as a site for widespread civic political participation. In February 2018 and April 2019 when anti-Muslim riots led by Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist mobs erupted, the Sri Lankan government's contentious relationship with media freedoms resulted in several draconian internet shutdowns. To stop the spread of fake news and hate speech that was supposedly motivating the violence against Muslims, access to various social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, were banned. Possibly due

to its limited take up at the time, Twitter remained accessible and as a result, many Sri Lankans shifted to the platform to keep up with the unfolding violence and contest debates about politics, freedom of expression, access to information and censorship.

Internet scholars Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that due to the absence of an accurate understanding of who is the audience in a publicly scalable setting such as Twitter, imagining an audience is an intrinsic practice of polylogical communications and it is therefore instrumental in how social media content is shaped and how behaviour on social media plays out. Thus, Twitter's outward-looking global affordances ensure that most of the Sri Lankan commentary on Twitter happens in English as Sri Lankans imagine their discussions on the world stage for an international audience. Since the British colonisation of the island (1815-1948), then named Ceylon and renowned for its profitable crops of tea, coffee and rubber, English has played an important and controversial role in Sri Lankan post-colonial society. Anthropologists reject the popular accusation that the ethnic lines that ruptured into civil war between the Sinhala and Tamil communities were drawn by the British (see McGilvray, 2008; Spencer 1990, 2007; Tambiah, 1996), but English has remained the third language in a trilingual state comprising Sinhala and Tamil to act as a lingua franca between the two largest ethnic communities and remains prominent in media. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956 was a legislative shift that epitomised an increasingly Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist state hell-bent on marginalising Tamil and other minority groups, but the recent rise of digital platforms, predominantly built in Silicon Valley, has further pushed English as a preferential language, especially among young Sri Lankans on Twitter, who view their life and voice as part of a much bigger international, political discussion. It is in this way that computing, and its associated technologies, should be considered as a colonial phenomenon (Ali, 2016).

The study of social media in Sri Lanka has seldom been treated anthropologically, but there is a rich tradition of ethnographic works on the island nation through the post-colonial period. Of special importance is the ongoing works of Jonathan Spencer (1990; 2007; 2010; 2013; 2014) who located the return of the 'political' to the broader discipline of social anthropology based on a series of erratic ethnographic stories from his multiple fieldwork excursions in Sri Lanka. Spencer claims that the political in a Sri Lanka village—i.e. the development of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and reverence for the Sri Lankan state—is not a macro process of statecraft, but an ongoing procedure, reproduced locally in the miniate of everyday life. The basis of this argument is that during the 1950-60's and the post-war period when Global South decolonialisation saw ethnographers set foot in newly designated countries for the first time, and alongside people being ruled under new regimes, themes of ethnic identity and resistance came to the fore, contributing to a burgeoning subfield of political anthropology. But since this period, through the 1970-80s, anthropologists came to see the sphere of politics as organised by a political elite far removed from the everyday practices and experiences of the lives of ordinary people that anthropologists were interesting in documenting. Spencer, however, advocated for a radical departure from this apolitical anthropology, arguing that the 'political' is found in the microdetails of the everyday, and how even the smallest, most innocuous incidents can be found to reproduce and reinforce larger political processes of building and reinforcing the state. Critically, due to its focus on the everyday, anthropology is therefore in a privileged position to grapple with contemporary concerns relating to statehood including citizenship and nationalism.

Spencer's footprint is found in my study in how he demonstrated that *what is political* in the West may symbolise something very different to *what is political* in Sri Lanka. This distinction, I observe, is what underpins one of

anthropology's greatest virtues: the breakdown of entrenched and hegemonic Western categories such as 'politics' via case examples from non-US-Euro contexts. As such, one of the objectives of this thesis is to interrogate the category of social media influencer and question why people amass social media influence in Sri Lanka, thereby contributing to digital anthropology's task of providing for a more a global understanding of local cultures. The collaborative 'Why We Post' research (Miller et al, 2016) is purposely titled, 'How the world changed social media', to flip the popular perspective that digital technologies are fundamentally changing the nature of what is it to be human and the world around us, but instead demonstrate that social media is textually and experientially different cross-culturally. Not dissimilarly, my ethnography of social media in Sri Lanka explores how the ubiquitous development of social media influencers worldwide takes on new and profound circumstances locally and therefore calibrates the broader notion that platforms are not a homogenising force, creating facsimiles of culture worldwide; rather, the globalising forces of Facebook and Twitter are understood to be reappropriated by local cultures in new and unique ways. Thus, unlike in nearby India, where the most followed and therefore influential people on social media are film stars and sportsman, in Sri Lanka many of the most influential social media users are information influencers. Although information influencers are thriving in Sri Lanka, especially among young people and women, they still form a relatively small group. However, despite their relatively small size of the cohort, information influencers have brought about a political and social transformation in Sri Lanka society, widely relating to advancing women's rights, the release of falsely imprisoned activists, resisting COVID disinformation and promoting vaccine welfare.

Two dramatic and unexpected events happening during the course of my ethnographic study; one which has changed the path of Sri Lanka as a

whole and was partly orchestrated by some of my closest friends and research participants, the other was external to their lives but may well have extraordinary consequences for their daily practices and their relationship with news and media. The Aragalaya protests, meaning 'The Struggle' in Sinhala, erupted in March 2022 and evolved into a four-month continuous occupation of Galle Face Green in the heart of Colombo's busy centre. The culmination of the Aragalaya was the peaceful ousting of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and President Gotabaya Rajapaksas, a largely unthinkable result, given 'it has shaken the very foundations of an autocratic-authoritarian regime that was, up until now, perceived to be as strong as an immovable rock' (Uyangoda, 2023, 5). The protests were motivated by the economic crisis that has savaged the country since 2021 and the COVID:19 pandemic, resulting in life-threatening shortages of basic medicines, food and fuel. Some of the individuals who were on the frontline of the Aragalaya were using social media to criticise the government, vocalise the demands of the protestors, galvanise widespread, civilian support and gather international attention. The other notable occurrence that unfolded during my fieldwork, which would have a dramatic effect on the shape of my research and the lives of my research subjects was the \$ 44 billion acquisition of Twitter by the world's richest man, Elon Musk. The impact of this extraordinary development is still unravelling but within the first weeks of Musk's controversial and clumsy takeover of the world's 'public square', critical infrastructure and departments at Twitter relating to accountability and ethics in the Global South were dismantled to save costs. Musk's economic drive for profitability and his political advocacy for unbridled freedom of speech may well yet exacerbate the harmful effects of fake news and hate speech in the Sri Lankan context. Overall, information influencers are tapping into a global social media environment that is at once emancipatory and volatile, and, at the same time, they are negotiating a Sri Lankan political climate that is caustic and prone to sudden upheaval. This study illuminates the specific

ethnographic context of social media in Sri Lanka, by showing the concerns and experiences of local information influencers as they win respect, evade abuse, and they work behind the scenes of broader political activism movements, and whose guile, and verve are invaluable to the state of how information *influences*.

1.2 | Digital capital: An anthropological approach to social media influence

[i] Introducing digital capital

My analysis of how Sri Lankan information influencers accrue large followings and grapple with the trappings of opaque social media platforms and a volatile political sphere is situated within the anthropological study of social media and the rising interest in influencer culture. I propose the term digital capital as a useful heuristic for ethnographic engagement in the complex, emergent processes of influence on social media through its traces in digital data. Thanks to the influential work of Pierre Bourdieu (1983; 1984; 1985; 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) we can broadly understand that the social world is organised by the accumulation and exchange of various types of capital. Economic capital materialises in the form of hard currency, property deeds, contracts and numerous forms of intangible bonds, while symbolic capital is realised through other means including titles, education, possessions, vernacular, and social networks, and is exchanged through the performance of interaction. This reconceptualization of capital was a significant turn in the second half of the twentieth century by virtue of its distinct departure from the entrenched Marxist tradition of treating capital

as a purely economic process, into more symbolic, cultural and social methods of exchange. Contemporary theorists, Ignatow and Robinson summarise symbolic capital as ‘stocks of internalized ability and aptitude as well as externalized resources which are scarce and socially valued... [and] like the more traditional form of capital, they can be transformed and productively reinvested’ (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, 952). However, when studying the rise of influencers, the implicit exchange of capital through digital technologies in its myriad forms has been rarely considered. This shortcoming forms the theoretical framework of my thesis to advance Bourdieu’s notion of capital and rewire it for the digital era, arguing that beyond economic, cultural, and social capital there is emergent form of capital—digital capital—that is growing in salience as the internet and digital mediated communications become increasingly ubiquitous.

Digital capital has previously been defined as, ‘the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving)’ (Ragnedda, 2018, 2367), and I contend that an individual’s digital capital is articulated through the datafication of social media. On social media, digital data, or what Angele Christin (2020) calls ‘visibility metrics’, such as a user’s clearly visible count of followers or how many likes and comments their content invites, are ubiquitous across the platform-mix, and they affect our lives in culturally constructed ways. The under-theorised affordances of this conspicuous feature of social media, I argue, is to present a patent gauge of a users’ fluctuating digital capital stockpile. Without this datafication then a user’s influence would be difficult to decipher between fellow users, and, more than that, the very idea of a *social media influencer* would be ambiguous, moot, in utero.

To make the case for the crucial concept of digital capital, I purposefully engage with studies that attempt to make sense of the new participatory potential of social media (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Mould, 2018; Poell,

Nieborg & Duffy, 2022) and the body of scholarship that emerged around the global phenomenon of influencers which has been noteworthy for its Cultural Industries approach that sees all social media activity as some form of exploitative labour (see Abidin 2013, 2015; Abidin & Brown; 2019; Cirucci, 2018; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013; Mavroudis, 2019). The Cultural Industries lens was founded by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972[1947]) who expressed disdain for the onset of popular culture and its role in oppressing the masses into widespread docility through entertainment. They had a particular aversion to the emerging cohort of 'celebrities', whom, they argued, were produced by 'the Industry' to seduce the public and advance the tendrils of capitalism. More than 70 years later, in one of the earliest landmark studies on the internet's participatory culture, Theresa's Senft coined the term 'microcelebrity' to describe the relationship camgirls and erotic internet performers have with their audience, "amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites' (Senft, 2008, 25). By discussing 'building the self as a brand' and 'engagement in a specific form of emotional labour', Senft was inaugurating the concepts that in the last fifteen years have gone on to define influencer studies (see Marwick 2013, Abidin, 2015, Bishop, 2020).

While I can appreciate the utility of approaching social media from a Cultural Industries perspective, the framing of a Marxist tradition of labour has significant shortcomings in the contemporary platform economy.

Scholars treating influencers as labour have made the persuasive cases for visibility labour (Abidin, 2015), fame labour (Mavroudis, 2019) and new feminist approaches to labour (Cirucci, 2018), but I argue that this framework relates to an ideological approach to social media that overemphasises platforms as sites for the exchange of economic capital only, and therefore neglects the symbolic exchange of capitals through

social media interaction. For example, Nick Srnicek's influential book, *Platform Capitalism*, (2017, 43-48) defines four conditions of what constitutes a platform. He says, platforms 1) situate themselves as benevolent intermediaries, providing the tools to enable users (advertisers, customers, producers and suppliers) to engage; they 2) rely on networks effects, the notion that the more users using the platform the better it will serve everyone else; platforms 3) cross subsidise, which means profits from one activity are used to allow for other free services (to gain more users and encourage the network effect); and they 4) dictate the politics or the 'rules of the game' with clandestine terms and conditions and microprocesses that 'nudge' profitable behaviours. The analytical value of this definition of a platform is how it accentuates the economic imperatives of platform culture and motivates researchers to think through questions such as, who are the explicit and implicit stakeholders of a platform? Who is deriving economic profit from platform performance, and who is being missing out?

[ii] Defining digital capital

Despite the gains made by the Cultural Industries approach, I question the usefulness of critiquing influencer culture through a strictly economic lens without considering capital in its more nuanced contemporary 'symbolic' Bordieuan sense. Moreover, this *economic* conceptualisation of influencer culture ignores the elephant the room: the meaning of word 'influence'. Influence implies something different to celebrity and fame; it is about affecting other people's worldviews and coercing action. Influence, therefore, relates to power, and I suggest that it should be considered through the prism of politics and control. To support this suggestion, I introduce a political communication perspective to the study of social media influencers. In 1957, Elihu Katz's important essay

debunked the ingrained assumption that the mass media was dominant in how it directly structured people's ideas and understanding of the world around them. Instead, Katz demonstrated how the media's influence is mediated by what he called 'opinion leaders': charismatic community members who are attuned to the media around them (radio, newspapers and magazines at the time) and who maintain highly active social networks and foster high levels of trust. Opinion leaders digest and regurgitate news and information making it locally relevant to deliver what Katz called the *two-step flow of communication*. What makes an opinion leader is not (only) economic wealth, but symbolic capitals in the form of education, titles, media connections and networks. Arguably, social media platforms such as Twitter have democratised the way information is circulated, placing a greater emphasis on 'opinion leaders' (i.e. influencers) to authenticate (or refute) the quality of information, before it is consumed by the masses.

Perhaps Bourdieu's absence in influencer studies possibly reflects broader academic fashion, however his ideas have been gaining some salience in contemporary studies on digital culture. His concept of habitus—the 'embodied system of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977, 72) that are inculcated in us through socialisation and reproduced by social action—has influenced several internet scholars (Papacharissi, Streeter & Gillespie, 2013; Romele & Rodighiero, 2020; Airoldi, 2022). The main thesis of Massimo Airoldi's book *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms* (2022) is that, just as Bourdieu described habitus as, 'the body is in the social world, but the social world is in the body' (Bourdieu, 1982, cited Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 20) as a metaphor to capture the perpetual feedback loop between agency and structure, there is a similarly symbiotic exchange happening in the contemporary digital milieu. 'The culture in the code and the code in the culture', says Airoldi (2022, 23), to illustrate the clandestine ways that

digital platforms collect data points from users to then reproduce, or feedback, hyper-targeted or preferential content or services.

Digital capital has already been employed to describe the complexity of inequalities in access to the internet and associated resources. Because the digital divide is a much more complex phenomena than simply the internet is accessible or not, but relates to raft of socio-technical factors, including class, gender, and colonial lines, Ragnedda formulates digital capital a heuristic to determine how people use digital technologies and what outcomes they aspire to obtain from connectivity. To make the point, Ragnedda writes:

'To use the Internet in an effective way, citizens need to have already built-up capital(s) in their offline life.... For instance, those users who have an already strong economic capital can further increase their original capital through the use of ICTs and their digital capital, by transforming their digital experience into social resources that could improve their socio-economic status (e.g. exploiting their online activities to get a better job position or to improve their businesses). Similar mechanism could be applied for social (e.g. enlarging social network), personal (e.g. increasing self-confidence), political (e.g. improving civic engagement) and cultural capitals (e.g. boosting literacy and skills). Therefore, those who access the Internet with a high endowment of social capital, with personal motivations and proper cultural, political and economic background, will be more likely to reproduce their capitals online, applying mechanisms similar to those adopted offline. In turn, the capitals (enhanced online) will support users' offline activities, through the interaction with digital capital' (Ragnedda, 2018, 2368).

The main takeaway from this long but important citation is that a user's digital capital is likely to reflect an individual's economic and symbolic capital offline. For example, economic capital is likely to determine the quality of the technological hardware a user has access to (i.e. what smartphone or desktop they can afford), their cultural capital impacts the ability to use software and their aspirations around how to use it; and one's social capital is reflected in their digital network. Thusly, we can infer that the digital divide in all its complexity is a broader reflection of 'offline' societal inequalities and based on a complex entanglement of material and symbolic conditions.

[iii] Rewiring digital capital

In *The Forms of Capital* (1986), Bourdieu begins his essay with the evocation of the roulette table and the analogy for how, in the real world, economic and symbolic capital are rarely evenly stockpiled. Of the roulette table he writes:

Roulette, which holds out the opportunity of winning a lot of money in a short space of time, and therefore of changing one's social status quasi-instantaneously, and in which the winning of the previous spin of the wheel can be staked and lost at every new spin, gives a fairly accurate image of this imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one, every soldier has a marshal's baton in his knapsack, and every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything' (Bourdieu, 1986, 241).

What Bourdieu is describing is the myth of how social life presents itself as a meritocracy; that opportunities are equal, and hard work and conviction will be rewarded, veiling the stark reality that 'the social world is accumulated history' (ibid. 241), compiled of a capitalist system that favours wealth accumulation, relies on the exploitation of an underclass, and fosters opportunities by cronyism and nepotism. The myth of meritocracy is so entrenched in the social world that it keeps us consenting, simultaneously diminishing notions of revolution because the status quo—this imaginary one at least—is just and non-discriminatory. I observe that Bourdieu's metaphor of the roulette table is transferrable to social media because the myth of meritocracy that pulses through social life also extends to social media. Like roulette and the real world in Bourdieu's analogy, social media promotes the ideology of equality and freedom by providing a free-to-use platform where users can make highly personalised content that has the potential to 'go viral' and *change one's social status quasi-instantaneously*. But does social media really offer ordinary people the opportunity to socially-climb, acquiring wealth, fame or influence along the way?

As an ethnographer of social media, my interest is to investigate how users amass digital capital and use it for their political goals whilst also considering what and why platforms afford certain behaviours. And as I have argued, to establish digital capital as an intrinsic model of participation on social media, we need to move social media studies away from its situatedness in Cultural Industries and resist seeing platforms as sites of economic exchange only. To reconfigure the approach, I suggest thinking through danah boyd's older definition of social networking sites. She says platforms are:

'...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)

articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.' (boyd and Ellison, 2008, 211)

I suspect that this definition has lost some of its eminence because it was proposed in relation to the out-of-fashion term, 'social networking sites' (SNS), which was quickly subsumed by the now-ubiquitous, catch-all term, 'social media', but my instinct is to salute boyd's emphasis on the platform design features that allows users to articulate a list of their network to be traversed by other users, thereby allowing for influence or popularity to be built and maintained on the one side, and observed and judged on the other. As I described in the opening section of this chapter, the *Why We Post* research by nine digital anthropologists (Miller et al, 2016) has done an important job in registering one of the defining conventions of what makes social media distinct from previous modes of mediated communications as polylogical interactivity: that is, the ability to communicate with three or more specific interlocutors, the affordance of which, they argue, is 'scalable sociality'. As resituated here, through the early work of boyd, the visibility of a user's network is *another* defining feature of what makes social media distinct from previous modes of communication because access or visibility to social networks through monological or dialogical communications was not only *not* possible, but it was irrelevant to relations established through pre-polylogical communications. I argue that the affordance of the datafication of a user's network, and their content production through likes, emojis and comments—a development in social media design that came after boyd's emphasis on networks only—is the accumulation and exchange of digital capital.

According to Ranegdda's original conception, digital capital is 'the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving)' (Ragnedda, 2018, 2367), and it should follow, then, that the number of followers a user has, and therefore how influential they are, should be a direct indicator of a user's digital competencies i.e., how capable they are at digesting and disseminating information, avoiding harm and protecting others, producing content, and resolving problems. However, as Ragnedda also rightly points out following Bourdieu's vision for how capitals reproduce one another, digital capital reflects broader societal divisions and a user's accumulation of capital in the digital sphere is likely to be reflective of their economic and symbolic capital IRL, thereby suggesting that the digital sphere reneges on its emancipatory potential, instead reproducing existing inequalities IRL. As a result, I question this original definition of digital capital, by asking, how can digital capital be defined as 'the accumulation of digital competencies' if it is directly and impactfully informed by external (i.e. non-digital) practices?

To be clear, having an impressive stockpile of digital capital is not a direct indicator of one's digital competencies. The most followed users on Twitter worldwide, and therefore the most influential people on the platform, are global celebrities: Elon Musk, Barack Obama, Justin Bieber, Cristiano Ronaldo, Rihanna and Katy Perry. It is no surprise that this collection of Western, household names are a mixture of extreme wealth, power, physical prowess, talent and sex appeal. Thus, it is a misstep to theorise that Cristiano Ronaldo's 100+ million followers follow his content for his digital competencies! Extreme as these examples may be, they clearly demonstrate that digital capital is a representation of economic, social and cultural capital IRL. In my case study of Twitter in Sri Lanka during the Aragalaya protests, the ex-president of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the incumbent, Ranil Wickremesinghe, are two of the most

followed accounts in the Sri Lanka Twittersphere. Content analysis of their user profiles shows that they are highly influential actors, with over 500,000 and 300,000 followers, respectively. Their colossal following reflects their status IRL: an elite political class of powerful Sinhalese men, highly educated and from extraordinarily wealthy backgrounds. I am confident to suggest that they do not have especially high-skilled digital competences, rather their enormous stockpile of digital capital is a reproduction of their economic and symbolic capital IRL.

The information influences of my study appear to have amassed close to the apex of digital capital on Twitter for *ordinary* citizens, many accumulating somewhere between 5,000 - 50,000 (with one exception into the hundreds of thousands), reflecting their digital competencies in content creation and information dissemination, skills acquired through their middle-class backgrounds and university education (which is free in Sri Lanka). Indeed, the vast majority of all the information influencers I worked with, ethnographically, were Sinhalese, the majority ethnicity in Sri Lanka, and most grew up near or in Colombo, the capital city. Of the twenty information influencers that worked closely with only one was Tamil and only a handful were Muslim: the two most prominent minority groups in the country. As such, despite the emancipatory opportunities seemingly afforded by social media, digital capital accumulation appears to reproduce the historically entrenched racial, class/cast and rural-urban inequalities and imbalances of Sri Lanka. Contrarily, I can confirm that I identified and worked with more female influencers than male, suggesting the entrenched gender binary of Sri Lanka that sees women in subaltern positions in myriad social environments is not being reproduced, per se, in the race for digital capital.

Throughout the thesis, I will draw on my ethnographic fieldwork to propose digital capital as an emerging concept that has the capacity to portray a

social media milieu that involves a highly contestable process that is prone to fakery, rival bids, exchange and discreditation, but I am not suggesting that digital capital is some kind of ethnographic abstraction, an esoteric observation from the field *for my eyes only*. Rather, the procedure of digital capital accumulation was to become a meaningful methodological practice of skills acquisition that I had to adopt to gain trust and conduct ethnography amongst a highly sensitive cohort whose methods of sociality were predominately digital. In some respects, acquiring digital capital myself was almost the equivalent of learning a language in traditional ethnographic works, and as such, digital capital emerges as a critical element in repertoire of the contemporary (digital) anthropologist. In the following section I explore in detail the methodological choices that have helped lead me to and galvanise my understanding of how digital capital functions and its usefulness as an ethnographic framework for the analysis of influence on social media.

1.3 | Research in a pandemic: Towards an augmented ethnography

My PhD research began in October 2020, around the time the United Kingdom had the highest death toll in Europe and the second highest in the world after the United States (Duncan & Barr, 2022). With severe lockdown measures in place and long before a vaccine-solution had been tabled, traveling to Sri Lanka to conduct traditional ethnography amongst highly political Sri Lanka social media users felt outside of the realms of possibility. However, three years on I am relieved to report that the research did get done, and, surprisingly, across three geographic field sites in three different countries, possibilities emerged that appeared unfathomable at the beginning. To achieve my research goals, I

approached my emergent field sites in what has been called a 'post-digital condition' (Rasch, 2018, 51); one that takes the mediating of everyday life by digital technologies as a certainty. The term post-digital was first coined in a 2000 article on electronic music (Cascone, 2000) about how the revolutionary potential of the internet had been and passed; a prescient perspective given Apple's game-changing iPod was released one year later, and streaming platform Spotify was not to follow until 2006. Since then, 'post digital' has taken-on significant meaning across various disciplines concerned with the effects of widespread digitalisation, referring to a phase that does not necessarily imply that the digital is no longer new, but tries to grapple with the complex entanglements of cultural phenomenon after their digitisation (Cramer, 2014; Jandric et al, 2018). More recently, post-digital studies have been described as a 'convergence between the analog and the digital, the biological and the informational' (Traxler et al. 2022, 495), hinting towards the intrinsic value of the term because it accepts the increasing blurring of the lines between the online and offline world. Through a post-digital lens, digitalisation therefore is not a consistent or totalising force, instead, 'the ruptures produced [by the post-digital] are neither absolute nor synchronous, but instead operate as asynchronous processes, occurring at different speeds and over different periods and are culturally diverse in each affected context' (Cox, 2014, 71).

What then could a post-digital condition mean for an ethnographer embarking on research in the uncertainty of a global pandemic? My position was to embrace the challenge and experiment with unorthodox research practices, a decision that saw me research digital activism in Sri Lanka through the mediating technologies that afford the phenomena's existence. Vlad Glaveanu writes in the *Possibility Studies*' Manifesto that, 'we human *beings* live 'amphibious' lives – at once in the realm of the actual and the possible' (Glaveanu, 2022, 3) to emphasis the misty line

between what is real and around us, and what can be manifested by innovation and action. Thus, by embracing the problem of the pandemic and the gap between the actual and the possible, my eighteen months of fieldwork can be segmented into three distinct phases: six months of remote digital ethnography from a one-bedroom flat in London (Oct 21-Mar 22), a six-month research placement at the University of Helsinki to learn computational approaches and develop a datafied approach to ethnography (Apr 22-Sep 22), and, finally, a six-month excursion to Sri Lanka to collaborate alongside activists in what could be labelled *traditional* ethnographic methods (Oct 22-Apr 22). Having completed the research I would suggest, not dissimilar to the amphibiousness to which Glaveanu refers, that we human beings live ‘augmented’ lives, at once in the realm of in real life (IRL) and what is around us, and online spaces and experiences mediated by digital technologies. My fingers, ears, and eyes, while in London, Helsinki or Colombo, were always partly submerged in digital worlds—much like my research participants in Sri Lanka—and it was this augmentation that enabled the long-term ethnographic engagement that my research demanded. As a result, I introduce my methodological toolkit as augmented ethnography.

In the remainder of this *Introduction*, I want to outline three research processes that were inspired by covid restrictions but ultimately came to underpin my study in invaluable ways: (i) digital ethnography, (ii) datafied approaches to ethnography, and (iii) (un)traditional ethnographic fieldwork. The plan, however, is not to provincialize the three phases but to demonstrate how each of them is tightly bound together and serves to imagine the novel methodological practices of augmented ethnography. I also want to consider some questions that arose through the research process. As I became increasingly aware that my research was highly reflective of the restrictive conditions installed by COVID-19, I want to consider whether my research methods had a specific pandemic register.

Or, more precisely, I would like to query whether my ‘innovative’ research methods and decision-making are valid, or were they instead purely a reflection of the time and legitimate only in response to the restrictions of the pandemic?

[i] Digital ethnography

Over 8,000 kilometres from Sri Lanka, I began my ethnographic fieldwork sat at an Apple MacBook in a small flat in London, consuming content on my Twitter newsfeed. To resist not feeling too distant or cut off from actually being there *in the flesh*, I held on to the words of digital ethnographer, John Postil, who wrote, ‘as a growing number of people around the globe take up telematic media such as webcams, live streaming, or live tweeting, ‘being there’ from afar is becoming an ever more integral part of daily life.’ (Postil, 2017, 67) The Twitter headlines that morning were fresh revelations from the Panama Papers, the worldwide scandal that implicated scores of corrupt leaders and wealthy elites in tax evasion and financial corruption. From a Sri Lankan perspective, the data leak had exposed parliament member, Nirupama Rajapaksa, cousin of the incumbent President and Prime Minister, who was found to have \$18 million in assets in offshore holdings. Leading the debate was an information influencer I came to know very well over the next 18 months. Having over 14,000 followers, I took notes on Lahiru’s content and made plans to contact him. From following his timeline and others in his network, I learnt that since the beginning of the pandemic Sri Lanka had followed a global pattern of backsliding on its democratic processes. Asia’s oldest democracy had shifted from a parliamentary democracy to a new presidential authoritarian model with the unveiling of the 20th Amendment to the Constitution in September 2020 (Uyangoda, 2021). I determined, for my ethnographic study, my goal was to somehow insert myself in the Sri

Lanka Twittersphere and connect with information influencers like Lahiru in Sri Lanka. Previously, I had infrequently used Twitter for several years, so I was familiar with the user interface, but had rarely found the confidence to express myself, and I had used it mainly as a tool to follow fellow researchers. My resolve told me I would need to build my own stockpile of digital capital by producing interesting content and interacting with active Sri Lankan users.

Having previously engaged in the scholarship on social media and influencers, I understood that by encouraging users to engage in behaviours aligned to the market logics of deregulation and the privatisation of the public space, Twitter affords the reproduction of neoliberalism. For example, the common practice of sharing photos and textual updates on the minutiae of everyday life on social media, otherwise known as 'life-streaming', has the effect of promoting a sense of 24/7 availability, a blurring of the distinction between work and play, and future-performance based on prior-analytics (Marwick, 2013). I was not surprised to find that I was expected to reproduce these 'Silicon Values' (York, 2021) and subscribe to the neoliberal logic of visibility and self-branding in order to conduct remote digital ethnography. While I stopped short of sharing photos of my breakfast, the strategy I adopted to increase my visibility to social media users in Sri Lanka was to produce interesting and slightly satirical political content about Sri Lanka. My intention was to never say anything too strong or controversial but simply to add value to the Sri Lanka Twittersphere and represent myself as someone who may be worth following, and someone an information influencer may wish to engage with.

One piece of content that I was produced was called 'Politically [Auto]Correct'. Inspired by the data visuals of Noah Veltman (2013), I typed the prompt 'Why is Sri Lanka' into Google's UK search engine (google.co.uk)

and took a screenshot of the ten autocomplete prompts that Google automatically generates (see Figure 1). The commonplace inference is that the ten autocomplete suggestions appear to illustrate the most popular searches to this prompt in this location, and therefore demonstrates the general perceptions and attitudes of UK internet users to the subject country of Sri Lanka.

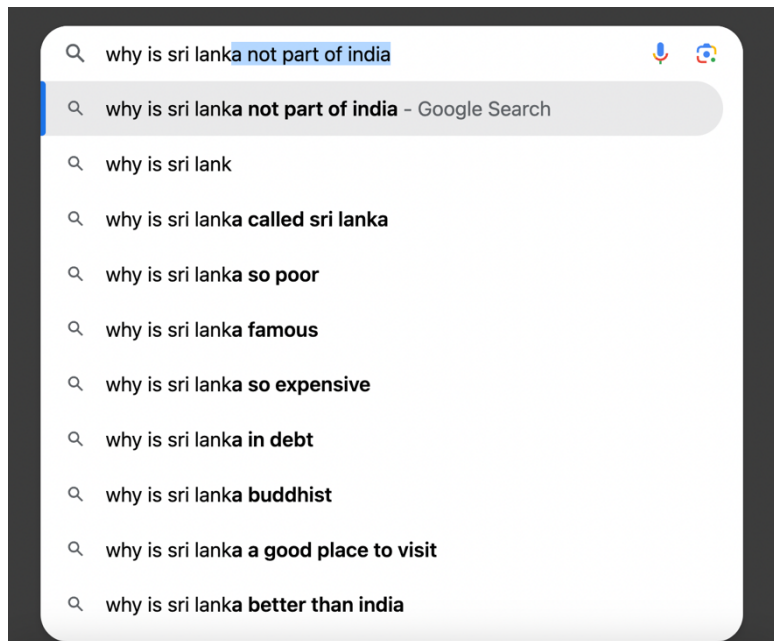


Figure 1: Screenshot of the Google UK's autocomplete suggestions to the prompt, 'Why is Sri Lanka...'. 'Why is Sri Lanka not part of India' is Google's primary autocomplete suggestion.

Following this initial experiment with Google UK, my plan was to capture similar screenshots to the same prompt ('Why is Sri Lanka...') from various Google-country-specific browsers and present the graphics in a visually appealing way in keeping with memetic culture of social media (See Figure 2). I specifically chose India, UK and USA for comparison due to their historic and ongoing geopolitical relations with Sri Lanka (and because I could easily access google.com.in (India), google.com (US), and google.co.uk (UK). For example, one of the top-ranking autocomplete questions on Google across Indian, British and American users, was '*Why is Sri Lanka not part of India?*', a point of contention that I was sure to catch the attention of Sri Lankan Twitter users. When I published the content on

Twitter, I deployed tactics I observed information influencers use to presumably increase their visibility; for example, I added the hashtag #lka (shorthand for 'Lanka') as this performs a default filtering system for all content about Sri Lanka.



Figure 2: POLITICALLY [AUTO] CORRECT. An example of satirical political content I made whilst conducting digital ethnography to increase my visibility in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere.

In terms of enhancing my visibility and building my brand on Twitter, ‘Politically [Auto] Correct’ was an unequivocal success, generating 14,203 impressions, 1,396 engagements, 32 retweets and 56 likes, metrics that greatly enhanced my digital capital as numerous Sri Lankans decided to follow me after seeing the playful but provocative content. Another piece of content I published, ‘Decolonising Wikipedia’ (see Figure 3) was less popular receiving 6,910 impressions, 16 retweets and 34 likes, but it continued my exercise of building my digital capital and ingratiating me into my research participants’ newsfeeds. In both cases I generated followers and engagement with the kinds of people—journalists, bloggers, influencers and self-determined activists—who I was interested in

connecting with for participant observation and ethnographic interviews. I felt pure joy when an activist with over 40,000 followers retweeted my google search engine expose. Another activist commented ‘this is a pretty cool post’, providing me with the opportunity to open a conversation with them and organise an initial interview.



Figure 3: DECOLONISING WIKIPEDIA. Another example of the satirical content I produced to increase my visibility amongst political Twitter users in Sri Lanka.

To complement my political content, I continued my visibility labour by populating my Twitter profile page with accurate information about myself, an affable profile picture, and a hyperlink to my professional website. On the website, I laid out my research objectives in clear terms (i.e. no academic jargon) so potential research participants could fully understand my research agenda and provide their informed consent if they

chose to participate³. This was a long-winded but ultimately fulfilling ethnographic exercise in what anthropologists have called, 'getting in' (Leigh et al., 2021), where being present in the culture studied and gaining trust with potential participants is an essential rite of passage that all good ethnography relies on. In the longer term, what was so profoundly beneficial about conducting remote digital ethnography was that it forced me to confront the platforms and processes that the digital activists of my study were also facing. By grappling with opacity of how the Twitter algorithm rewards certain user behaviours, and by trying to maximise my international visibility and acquire followers, I was experiencing and emulating the protocols and challenges that information influencers adopt for their own political participation in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere. For example, Ama, who brought #MeToo to Sri Lanka, told me that she only selectively uses the #lka hashtag because sometimes, ironically, she does not want her content to be seen by 'everyone'. As a liberal Muslim woman advocating for female and minority group equality, there are times when Ama wants to avoid interacting with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and conservative Muslims, so she opts to *not* use the #lka hashtag.

I am not suggesting that by emulating Ama's tactics to gain visibility has enhanced my remote digital ethnography; rather I am reflecting that by sharing similar experiences to those of my participants, I developed a highly nuanced and empathic perspective in my future collaborations with them. Now I was beginning to understand from first-hand experience how working to achieve visibility and building one's digital capital were quintessential practices to achieve one's social media goals. Moreover, months later when I was to finally arrive in Sri Lanka and start participant

³ Potential research participants were directed to my personal website craigeryder.com/phd/ where my research interests, methods, ethics and objectives are laid out in non-academic language. The webpage links directly to an online [consent form](#) that research participants could sign digitally. I judged an online system to be more efficient and secure than a physical paper-trail.

observation with information influencers, several of my colleagues referenced the 'Politically Auto-Correct' piece as something that caught their attention or '*where they remember me from*'.

[ii] A datafied approach

Following the lift of pandemic restrictions across Europe, in April 2022, I arrived at the University of Helsinki to explore computational processes to ethnography *just* as something extraordinary was happening in Sri Lanka. The *Aragalaya* saw thousands of Sri Lankans take to the streets and protest for a country on the cusp of economic collapse. Due to the severe shortage of basic amenities including food, fuel and medicines, the UK Home Office was recommending nothing but essential travel to Sri Lanka, and therefore traditional in-person ethnographic fieldwork was not-possible. In Helsinki, my Twitter feed, having had six months of interactions with Sri Lankan users via remote digital ethnography, was alive to the minute-by-minute events as the *Aragalaya* unfolded in Sri Lanka. Lahiru, the information influencer who had caught my attention with the Panama Papers' discussion posted intense video content of protestors being water cannoned by state law enforcement. Another, Rushma, shared photos of one devastating night when a small fraction of the protestors turned to violence and set fire to the (second) homes of 38 Sri Lankan MPs (Athas & Mogul, 2022). Thus, as travel to Sri Lanka was unpermitted, my decision to work at the Helsinki Institute for Humanities and Social Science (HSSH) and explore how datafication may be implemented into the ethnographic process was a speculative attempt to continue my study from afar. My objective was to learn basic computational coding and a technical procedure of extracting data from social media platforms such as Twitter and visualise the data sets to evaluate debates and social networks between highly influential operators. Early on, I learnt that data is never

'raw', as common parlance may suggest, nor is it neutral, because data has been collected with a purpose, on purpose (boyd & Crawford 2012). Equipped with this understanding I wanted to interrogate what Twitter data's non-neutrality means for information influencers who were having their every move on social media captured, stored and surveilled.

In 2021, a collaborative special issue from the Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute suggested that there are two ways that anthropology can engage with data (Douglas-Jones et al., 2021). The first way is through intentional ethnography with 'data-communities'. Defined as groups who have an explicit relationship with data, such the Indian citizens of Nair's (2021) study on biometric identification data, or the British climate-conscience home-heaters who tweak their home smart-meters for productive gains (Knox, 2021), researching data communities is explicit ethnographic engagement with people who are knowingly interacting with digital data. The second way for anthropology to engage with data is when 'accidental ethnographers' happen upon data whilst in the field because digital data is becoming so prevalent it bleeds into unexpected areas of social life. TallBear's (2013) research on Native American kinship is a case in point, who demonstrates Native People's increasing interest in genetic databases is a necessary ploy to protect their identity and rights. During my computational training in Helsinki, it struck me that there is a third way for anthropologists to engage with data. By accessing the digital traces that social media users cannot *not* produce (Hepp, 2018), the upskilled ethnographer can access data from the platform on the conversations and networks related to their cultural phenomena of interest. In addition, my hypothesis that was research may be elevated by being made to confront the normally intractable occurrence of digital data, providing opportunities to ethnographically engage with a phenomenon that has an ambiguous and indisputable role

in how the contemporary social world is organised, but that has been notoriously difficult for ethnographers to grapple with.

My datafied approach therefore involved a two-step process that marries computational social science using big data legally extracted from Twitter with subsequent qualitative in-person fieldwork with information influencer in Sri Lanka. In the first step, big data was initially collected using the Twitter Developer Account available to academics following a vigorous process of approval from the platform. Access is granted to the Twitter API (Application Programming Interface) that acts as a technical mediator between the researcher and the social media system (Pariah, Birkbak, Freeman, 2020). Having been following the Aragalaya protests on Twitter for several months, I compiled search queries made up of relevant hashtags relating to the protests on social media (e.g.: #aragalaya; #srilankaprotests; #gotagogama et al). These hashtags were instructively selected due to their specificity to the Sri Lankan protests of 2022. Searching arbitrary hashtags such as '#srilanka' or '#protest' would have not demarcated the site of inquiry accurately enough and the search queries would prompt the retrieval of large swathes of unrelated data, for example, tourists' tweets about #srilanka or #protests happening in Hong Kong. For further specificity, the dataset was filtered down to a four-month time-phase, from 21 March 2022 to 31 July 2022, to cover the period of active occupation of the Galle Face Green in downtown Colombo.

The twitter datasets were then visualised using open-source software Gephi. In computational jargon, users are euphemised as 'nodes' and interactions as 'threads', and if nodes/users have interacted they are connected by a thread (a thin line connecting them). To conduct visual network analysis (VNA), an established data visualisation technique, I applied a Force Atlas algorithm to the nodes and threads to create spatialisation (Jacomy et al., 2014). In short, a Force Atlas algorithm

charges all nodes with a repulsive force that encourages them to isolate, whilst threads are charged with an attractive force. Thus, nodes that have many threads—or in other words, users that interact a lot together—are pulled closer together, thereby creating community clusters which are subsequently coloured-coded. In addition, size variables are added so nodes with lots of threads (interactions) are enlarged on the network. Thus, the size of the nodes acts an instructive indicator of how influential the user is and therefore how much digital capital they have accumulated and exchanged.

Figure 4 is a spatialized network of all the nodes/users who tweeted under the ‘#aragalaya’ hashtag. The merit of VNA is that it reproduces data in a visually appealing way and enables the researcher to observe how nodes are connected, allowing for broad stroke inferences about influential operators. However, as a digital ethnographer critical of the datafication of the everyday, I could recognise the limitation of visual network analysis as a standalone methodological tool, largely because of its overreliance on opaque data practices. While I could comprehend that there were nearly 200,000 tweets in the dataset, equating to over 2 million data points in the entire data collection, I could not gather any technical understanding of how the Force Atlas Algorithm functioned, and nor could any experts advise me. Indeed, I discovered that replicating the exact technical procedure on the same dataset would result in vividly different spatialisation visualisations. Given how spatialisation methodology has been the source of a burgeoning research community and numerous research publications (Venturini et al., 2015; Venturini et al., 2019), I found it difficult to trust the computational processes that present an ambiguous snapshot of social media activity and claims ‘objective reality’, therefore relying on big data’s ‘aura of truth’ (boyd & Crawford, 2012, 663).

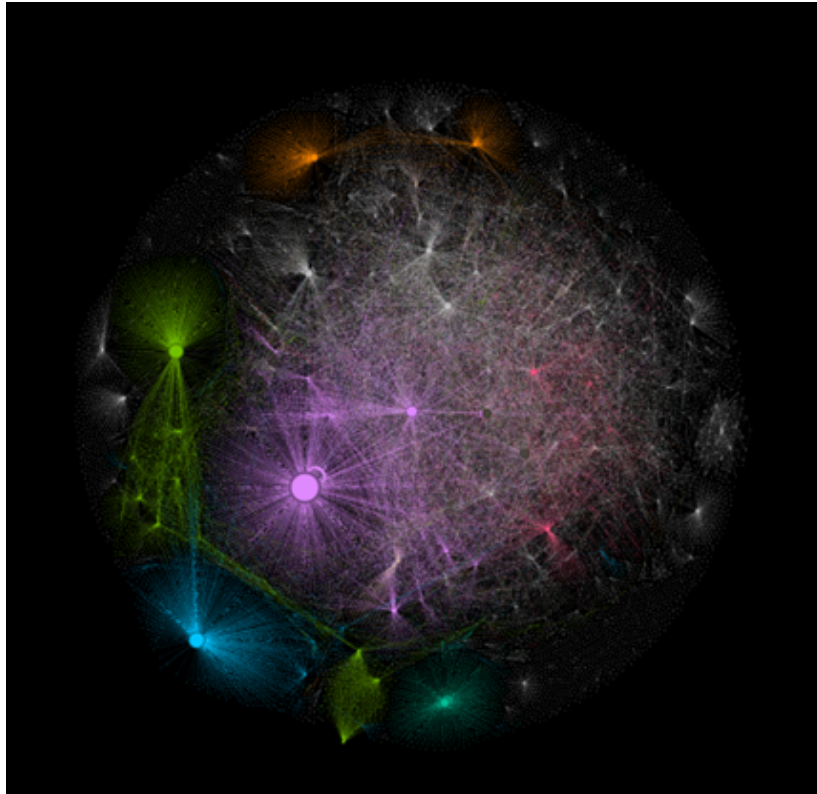


Figure 4: The #Aragalaya hashtag extracted from the Twitter API and visualised using Gephi. Spatialisation techniques highlight and enlarge the most influential users. [I have removed the names of nodes/users to protect confidentiality].

In August 2022, as the Aragalaya dispersed following the installation of the new president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, and a new deal was signed with the IMF so the government could purchase essential medicine, food and fuel, international travel was permitted once more to Sri Lanka, and I made plans to arrive in October 2022. Therefore, in the next stage of my three-phase methodology, to challenge this limitation of the graphs, I decided to actively involve Sri Lankan information influencers who were identified by the VNA and ask them to make sense of the visualisations and co-produce knowledge with me. Having had my hand forced into learning a datafied approach to conduct research in the face of post-pandemic travel restrictions, I had now produced digital data that demanded ethnographic analysis, creating a third way for anthropology to engage in data. What transpired, as I explore in Chapter 4, is that information influencers in Sri Lanka had different and highly selective perspectives on the data

visualisations exhibiting what data anthropologists have called 'multiple data realities' (Knox, 2021, 108). Participants identified by the data visualizations had conflicting opinions on truth, surveillance and danger underpinning the manifold ways in which data is actively interpreted as something subjective, ambiguous, and emergent, contributing to the dissolution of data as being somehow objective or neutral.

[iii] (Un)Traditional Ethnography

Towards the end of October 2022, as I arrived in Colombo for *traditional* ethnographic fieldwork, an extraordinary event unfolded that would have dramatic consequences for my study. Elon Musk, the world's richest man, controversially acquired Twitter in a deal worth \$ 44 billion (Conger & Hirsch, 2022). In his first week, Musk made the shocking decision to sack entire departments relating to hate speech and disinformation in the Asia-Pacific region, and scores of senior staff departed perturbed by the billionaire's disregard for ethics and accountability. Unsurprisingly, amongst my research participants who were all avid social media users and who I was observing on Twitter, Musk's acquisition was a hotbed of debate. From a research perspective, I needed to understand how this upheaval of the social media landscape was going to affect my informants' lives, the ethnographic 'field site' that I was actively participating in and how the wider public experiences, circulates and trusts information on Twitter.

Upon arriving in Colombo and securing an apartment, I posted my personal news on Twitter (Figure 5), as I discovered is best practice when trying to accrue digital capital, and the photo post of my new bedroom and lounge received a handful of likes and comments from Sri Lankans. One of the commenters was Lahiru, an activist who in the previous year of remote

digital ethnography, I had come to know well through regular public Twitter interactions and personal text messages, and a structured Zoom-based interview. After welcoming me to Sri Lanka on Twitter, our chat progressed to WhatsApp, an indicator I came to understand that the conversation was becoming more intimate and important. By chance, my apartment was in the same neighbourhood as his family home, and he invited me to his birthday celebrations at a city restaurant. I was to be the sole guest from outside his household of wife, mother and brother, and they were to pick me up on the way. I am sure I would not have been invited to such a personal and private occasion, so quickly at least, if it was not for the firm bond of trust we had built through digitally mediated coordination and the digital capital we had exchanged over the past year.

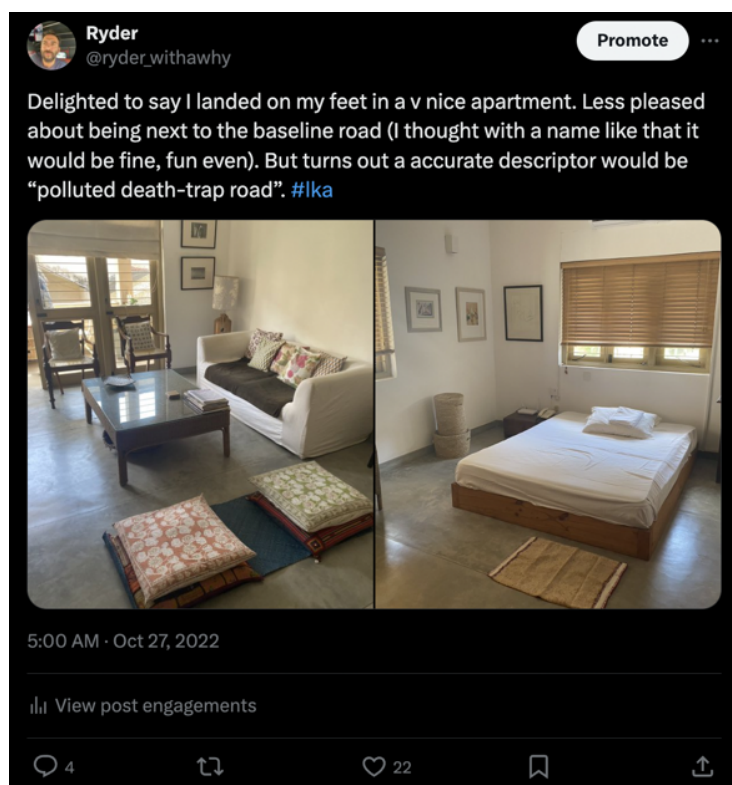


Figure 5: An innocuous tweet about my living arrangements in Colombo led to a conversation with Sri Lanka activist Lahiru and an invite to his birthday party.

However, I do not wish to exaggerate the efficacy of digital ethnography as a sole research method, because the *traditional ethnography* I was

fortunate enough to deploy in the final six months of my fieldwork provided the methodological stitches to what has previously been called 'patchwork ethnography' (Günel et al, 2020). Traditional ethnography has been instrumental in my study because of the spontaneity that IRL offers. For example, I am almost certain I could not have organised conversations with Lahiru's family via digitally mediated tools. Moreover, the intimate group setting of a birthday party offered unpredictable moments of great novelty and value. After our main course of fried rice noodles, Lahiru was presented with a birthday cake that his wife, Isuri, had had made at a local bakery, embossed in icing with the words 'REVOLUTION * FIGHT TOGETHER', complete with a clenched fist (Figure 6). Until then, the conversation had been birthday joviality and jibes about the 'Guns 'n' Roses' music his brother had played in the car as we drove over, but the provocative cake turned us all onto conversations about politics and protest. Musk's recent Twitter acquisition invariably came up and I said I would like to talk to activists about it. They suggested I contact Dr Hiripitiya, one of Sri Lanka's leading experts on social media, who was being very vocal on Twitter at the time, telling activists and other sensitive groups, including journalists, women in public office and those in the LGTB community, to urgently check their Twitter privacy settings as the platform has been compromised due to Musk's sudden drive for profitability.



Figure 6: Lahiru's revolutionary birthday cake that turned a family celebration onto a conversation about politics, Twitter and Elon Musk.

I have called this subsection of my methodological toolkit '(Un)Traditional Ethnography' because the digitalisation of the everyday continued to steer how I did traditional ethnography whilst I was *on the ground* in Sri Lanka. It transpired that even without COVID:19 pandemic restrictions in place, my research methodology of choice to understand the acquisition of Twitter was a video-based focus group. As I will go on to explore in *Chapter 6*, following conversations with Dr Hiri, first via Twitter DM, then WhatsApp, and then a telephone call, we agreed that a video-based focus group on the popular video conferencing tool, Zoom, was the most democratic and accessible way to host an open conversation and to welcome the most people of interest into the 'Zoom room'. We considered the constraints of Zoom, including the necessary requirement of a smart device with internet connectivity, and we judged that given our cohort's specific interest and high usage of digital communications, that it was reasonable to assume that they would have invested in personal mobile technology and data plans, and therefore could freely participate.

In general, anthropology has had an ambivalent relationship with *traditional* focus groups because the staged setting is antithetical to participant observation and the ethnographic emphasis on engaging participants in their natural environment (Agar & McDonald, 1995). Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that focus groups are a practical addition to the ethnographer's toolkit because they can foster novel interactions between disparate individuals and groups, and they are also a useful mechanic for discussing highly sensitive topics that may be taboo in 1-2-1 interactions or that are unwelcome in 'natural environments'. For example, Sarah Hautzinger's (2012) research about domestic violence in Bahia, Brazil, found that preparators and victims did not want to discuss their experiences directly with the ethnographer, but the opportunity of a community-based focus groups allowed for people to candidly share with less fear of judgement and alienation. Online, synchronous, video-based focus groups add another layer of possibility. In favour of digital-mediated focus group is the ability to reduce travel time and costs, and therefore potentially broaden the reach of studies, becoming more inclusive for geographically diverse or hard to reach groups (Forrestal et al., 2015; Kite & Phongsavan, 2017). In my case, given the Sri Lankan government's challenging relationship with media freedoms and dissenter surveillance, the online focus group was a pragmatic choice because it allowed Sri Lankans to discuss a sensitive topic from the safety of their own home. Participants were invited to have their cameras on during the call, but most did not, therefore increasing anonymity and potentially fostering a safer, or more discreet research environment. Ethnographically, participants having their cameras off is not preferential because not being able to observe facial expressions and implicit cues from body language weakens the communication. Nevertheless, I tend not to treat research interactions as standalone entities: instead, I see the first interaction as a potential prelude to later ones. In the instance of this video-based focus group, I

met in person eight of the fifteen participants in-person for further interviews and meet ups, some of which developed into long-term research relationships.



Figure 7: The Eventbrite page I made to advertise the Zoom-based focus group I hosted with Dr Hiri designed in classic meme style.

On reflection, I suspect that the reason why we came to a decision to host an online video-based focus group, as opposed to an in-person one, was influenced by the previous restrictions instilled by the pandemic. Seemingly overnight—but more accurately over the course of the past two or three years—some of the practicalities of how we can most accessibly and proactively do research have been digitalised. I suspect that had I been organising an ethnographic focus group in Sri Lanka in a pre-pandemic world it would have been in a physical setting but given the standardisation of video conferencing into all manner of personal and professional activities, a Zoom-based focus group was not only feasible, but preferential.

Irrespective of this digitalisation of my ethnographic processes and their advantages and value, I should also state that in-person meet ups and

what can be considered *traditional* participant observation delivered truly unparalleled access to the lives of my participants and elevated my fieldwork findings. Like my experience of Lahiru's birthday party invitation, Bosco, one of the lead activists of the Aragalaya who I had met online previously and had similar chitchat with only on Instagram, invited me for a weeklong trip to the Jaffna peninsula with his closest friends to make influencer content. On the 10-hour drive to northern tip of the island, I met fellow activists Laksman, Daniel and Tayyabar for the first time all in the back of the mini-van, as Daniel handled the driving and Laksman the music! They became great friends of mine, but it was my online relationship with Bosco, built over a year of informally sharing memes on Instagram and WhatsApp, liking each other's content and responding with emojis, that had confirmed me as an ally for their important and highly sensitive trip to the capital of the Northern Province. Ironically, content from that week-long trip does not make it in this monograph, as I fell sick and was not in the mood to write extensive field notes. Yet, the experience of the trip remains one of the highlights of my traditional fieldwork insofar as it deeply connected me to five of my closest research participants and building friendships and bonds of trust has been the hallmark of my ethnographic fieldwork.

[iv] Towards an augmented ethnography?

From an ethnographer's perspective, the proliferation of digital technologies into even the most discreet areas of social life during COVID:19, the opportunities they afford and the inequalities they foster, set up an interesting conundrum. The people we study were having their social relationships changed in unpredictable and dynamic ways by digital technologies, but pandemic restrictions disallowed the traditional modes of ethnographic engagement. Yet the possibilities of technological

pervasiveness could also allow for novel, perhaps even, groundbreaking research methods. Was this the time for all ethnographers to go digital in some way or another, and what are the precedents for socially distanced, digitally mediated research methodologies that comply with pandemic restrictions?

The first year of my research was filled with vague attempts at 'pandemic-proofing' my methods; a term I came to use regularly in online seminars and discussions with my peers and supervisors to demonstrate that I was forging novel, mainly digitally mediated methodologies, that complied with social-distancing protocol and ethical best practices, whilst not delimiting the scope of the project, and maintaining a critical eye on the digitalisation of ethnographic practices. Years later and with the research complete, my position is to argue towards an augmented approach to ethnography that encompasses a blend of digital ethnography, datafied approaches, and IRL methods to the research design, regardless of whether pandemic restrictions are in play or not. I should acknowledge that due to my research area of interest being activism and social media, my research participants were digitally-savvy and lived what could be described as 'digital-lives'. However, I would also suggest that following the past 20 years of technological proliferation *and* the global pandemic, that most human beings live a digitally 'augmented' life, at once in the realm of the IRL and what is around us, whilst simultaneously also involved and participating in online spaces and experiences mediated by digital technologies. Like my research participants in Sri Lanka, who I discovered would use their smartphones for over ten hours a day, and some who would check and therefore be partly submerged in their preferred social media platform every 10-15 minutes, my fingers, ears, and eyes, while in London, Helsinki or Colombo, were also partly immersed in digital worlds, and it was this augmentation that enabled the long-term ethnographic engagement that my study demanded.

In a working paper published on 31st January 2020, therefore days before the world was plunged into a global pandemic, internet scholar Matti Pohjonen speculated on what an augmented ethnography might look like. He wrote:

'Computational methods were not used to test statistical models or hypotheses as is commonly done in computational analyses. Rather, they were used heuristically to augment the digital ethnographic exploration of the research. The use of computational models and large-scale datasets thus served as a kind of an external research prosthesis, a magnifying lens, to help the research identify new problem areas and new questions of interest that qualitative engagement did not allow on its own' (Pohjonen, 2020, 14)

I suggest in a post-pandemic, digitally mediated world, using big data *heuristically to augment the digital ethnographic exploration* could become a given rather than an exception. To achieve my research goals, I approached my ever-evolving field site in what has been called a 'post-digital condition' (Rasch, 2017); one that takes the mediating of everyday life by digital technologies as a certainty, with all its revolutionary ambiguity, inconsistent ruptures and asynchronous temporaries. Where my research advances Pohjonen's prompt of an augmented ethnography is that rather than a datafied approach acting strictly *as a kind of an external research prosthesis or a magnifying lens*, the datafied approaches and the digital methods of my research are in continuous dialogue with analog and real-world methodologies and relationships.

The relationships I formed via remote digital ethnography were instrumental in galvanising participant trust for traditional ethnography IRL, and by asking research participants to interpret the epistemologically opaque data visualisations, I developed an ethnographic, bottom-up approach to data analysis. Similarly, by choosing video conferencing when in-person meet ups were unrestricted, I fostered inclusivity and wider participation by maximising participant preference towards digital technologies in a post-pandemic world. Inspired by Glaveanu's amphibious metaphor of the how humans live at the intersection of the real and the possible, the augmentation promised by digital technologies provides a new frontier between what is real and what is possible in ethnographic research.

1.4 | Notes on positionality

The forthcoming chapters are a culmination of three years research and fieldwork and as outlined above, are an amalgamation of data inferred via traditional ethnographic methods alongside emergent digital and datafied approaches. I am conscious, however, that much like the mercurial big data that part of my research critiques as being compromised somehow by the platform that affords it, the findings that I extrapolate are derived through my own intellectual and social subjectivities. I would therefore like to share some of the elements of my background that may contribute to the analysis I present. I am a mixed British/Indian male researcher born in Essex, UK. I am a first-generation scholar with a background in anthropology and digital culture studies, having been educated at UK universities intellectually renowned for their 'lefty' rhetoric (despite the UK's university systems' near total seduction to neoliberalism).

Indian-born anthropologist, Kirin Narayan, contended that one's social identity is much more complex than insider/outsider dichotomies based on nationality as 'factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity' (Narayan, 1993, p). Thus, despite being born and raised in a working-class, immigrant family; I acknowledge that being a CIS gendered male with a first language of English has granted me considerable advantage in many walks of life. Furthermore, my position as a funded-PhD researcher living in London has given me access to privileges that the Sri Lankan participants of my study do not have. In Bordieuan terms, as an early-career academic, I have inherited and accumulated enough economic, cultural and social capital that has made my relationship with the internet a mostly positive and progressive one. I have had access to computation processes and digital technologies for over twenty years, granting me intellectual dynamism in how to navigate seemingly opaque platforms and cryptic web-practices.

Following the American anthropologist Sherry Ortner who summarised that, 'Ethnography of course means many things. Minimally, however, it has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self-as much of it as possible—as the instrumental of knowing. (1995, 174) I attest that throughout my PhD, I have looked to act ethically and continuously reflect on how my subjectivities are steering the findings I deduce and the narratives I advance. ?

CHAPTER 2 The Island Paradox: Violence, Media & Resistance in Sri Lanka

2.1 | Introduction

It was October 2022 and the first thing I noticed as I landed at Bandaranaike International Airport for my ethnographic fieldwork in Sri Lanka was how the 4g SIM card, encased in my Apple iPhone 11, was not operational. Maduri, a spiritedly elderly lady—well into her 80's, possibly 90s—whom I had booked a room with via the global, disrupter travel service, Airbnb, had told me to WhatsApp her when I land. She was also adamant I should take an Uber, the metropolitan *appified* taxi service, or the Sri Lankan alternative Pick Me, from the airport to her large family home in Colombo's upmarket Cinnamon Garden's neighbourhood, because it was 'much cheaper' that way. I had accepted Maduri's advice blindly, mainly because I did not want to reject her kindness, but due to a failed SIM card, I was being forced to go *old skool* and make the 35km journey armed only with barter economics and very vague directions. We live in a world, I thought to myself, somewhere between the online and the offline.

I had not been back to Sri Lanka since leaving in May 2018, where I had worked as a journalist and 'creative' for ~~one~~ of Colombo's hippest media startups. In that time, I had produced various forms of digital media: serious hard-hitting journalism, evocative *National Geographic*-esque content, and woeful clickbait specifically designed to keep our audience engaged in our social media pages. One of my final projects was a short

film documentary on the burgeoning tech ecosystem where I interviewed various in-the-know people, including several venture capitalists, a handful of visionary CEOs, a software engineering lecturer from Moratuwa University, even an official from the World Bank. The optimistic film was more of a marketing tool than critical piece of filmmaking that chimed with Sri Lanka's international reputation as a country open for investment; a standing based on the island nation's strong democratic traditions, food security for all, and welfare state providing free healthcare and education, creating a ready-to-work talent pool (Crawley, 2015). The short film, made in 2018, contrasted sharply with Sri Lanka's current economic crisis that emerged following the global COVID:19 pandemic which had dramatically reduced tourism and other vital sectors, culminating in the Aragalaya protests which had seen thousands of ordinary Sri Lankan's take to the streets to protest against government corruption, achieving the unthinkable, the removal of incumbent leaders, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and his brother in arms, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. The startup 'doc' that I had previously scripted and directed also deliberately skewed any mention of the 26-year war that had traumatised the country; the painful residuals of which are still palpable today.

Moving beyond a narrow conception of digital media, my aim here is to provide insight into what Poell, Nieborg and Duffy (2022) call, 'The Platformisation of Cultural Production'. According to them, not unlike television through 1960-70s, 'the development and rapid uptake of digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and WeChat are profoundly reconfiguring cultural production around the globe.' (Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2022, vi) From the travel and taxi services mentioned above, to shopping and dating, how we access goods and services has been radically transformed by the platformisation of cultural production which see platform companies such Amazon, Facebook and Netflix act as 'benevolent intermediaries' between services providers and consumers

(Srnicek, 2016, 43-48). In this process, platform companies have accumulated extraordinary wealth and power, developing a new form of capitalism based on exploitative user data extraction practices and advertising in return for free tools and services and highly preferential content (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Although I focus here on the singular case example of Sri Lanka, my theoretical understanding of the platformisation of cultural production goes beyond logical country boundaries to include a world undergoing breakneck change via the proliferation of digital media.

In this chapter, I move deeply into the developments over the past 70 years that have seen Sri Lanka shift from a post-colonial island with ambitions of being 'the next Singapore', implying economic security and technological advancements, to an island ravaged by decades of civil war and internal conflict, to the edge of bankruptcy in 2022, and to a position of renewed hope. I start with a description of Sri Lanka's paradoxical identity, followed by an historical overview of the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism and the state's battle with Tamil separatists. It will emerge that there is a link between violence and the proliferation of media and how the state tries to control media to maintain power and quell dissent. Then, via a discussion on fake news and the so-called 'post-truth' era, including an account of my experience as a journalist in Sri Lanka, I move onto post-structuralist approaches to information to build the broader contextual framework of the monograph. The rise of social media in Sri Lanka will be shown to provide the contradictory outcomes of increasingly authoritarianism of a heavy-handed government prone to internet shutdowns, whilst also providing opportunities for political participation and dissent via the prism of digital folk theories. I conclude by demonstrating how the chapter's exploration of wider political and media processes in Sri Lanka provides the background of how the advent of Aragalaya and the rise of information influencers in the country must be seen.

2.2 | Sri Lanka: An island paradox

A small island off the southern tip of the Indian Subcontinent, Sri Lanka has a population of approx. 22 million people, and a landmass of 200km wide and 400km in length (slightly smaller than Ireland). The island's natural beauty has been seducing visitors for eons, including Lord Buddha, who visited Sri Lanka from India in CE5th and declared the island the home of the dharma, and the local Sinhalese people were the custodians of his spiritual teachings. Sinhalese kings ruled the island's interior for centuries, building mighty places of worship, sustained by enormous reservoirs to feed and water a devoted, rural populace, and, today, Sinhala-Buddhists make up the majority (72%) of the population. The north of the island has historically been the entry point for Tamils arriving from India, either via Adam's Bridge, a 25km string of islands and sand spits that arise at low tide, or on small boats. The city of Jaffna on the northernmost tip became the Tamil heartland, where they built an illustrious empire renowned for its arts and literature, reflecting and in awe of their Hindu gods and beliefs. Muslim traders of the C5th moored on the pristine coastline and traded with Arabia, naming the island, Serendib. Latterly, Sri Lanka's strategic geographic position has meant it has acted, and acts, as a nexus between the West and the East, giving rise to a continuous chain of colonisation, first by the Portuguese (1597-1658), then the Dutch (1658-1796), and finally the British (1815-1948). Fast-forward more than 50 years and Chinese investment streams into the country suggesting a new form of colonisation is taking hold. With controversial Chinese loans, in recent years, the leading Rajapaksa regime have overseen Colombo's new international port and built 'the world's emptiest international airport'

(Shepard, 2016, 1) near their hometown, Hambantota, in the islands southeastern corner.

Post-colonialism from British rule arrived in 1948 giving rise to a power vacuum that has never been fully resolved. Upon independence, the country formulated a two-party system, based on the British administration, with the United National Party (UNP) adorned an outward-looking economically liberal agenda and their rivals, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), who served a socialist and largely Sinhala Nationalist mandate (Crawley, et al., 2015). In 1970, there was an attempted insurrection by a Marxist-youth movement called the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/People's Liberation Front) who took umbrage with the UNP's increasingly neoliberal approach to resources and wealth distribution. There has been a bloody, 26-year civil war, officially beginning in July 1983 and ending in May 2009, between the Sri Lankan state, largely dominated by Sinhala Buddhists nationalists, and the ethnically Hindu-Tamil militant separatist movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (sometimes referred to as the 'LTTE', or the 'Tamil Tigers'). At various critical junctures during the civil war, India, controversially for many Sri Lankans who fear India's size and might, acted as peacekeeper between the Sri Lanka state and the Tamil separatists. In 1987, India's Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was interpreted as an affront to Sri Lankan sovereignty by the JVP, who mobilised once again, and attempted a series of uprisings against state infrastructure and local polity. Anthropologist Dana Hughes reports that the student Marxists were mercilessly 'crushed by state-sponsored counter-insurrectionary violence' (Hughes, 2013, 2). The extraordinary violence, known locally as 'The Terror' (*Bheeshanaya*), between Sinhala youth versus Sinhala statesman during the two JVP uprisings (1971 and 1987-89) has been widely underreported, internationally; thus, Sri Lanka's remains more notorious for its intra-

ethnic conflict between Sinhala-Buddhists and Tamil-Hindus, than intra-Sinhalese battles.

Despite the horrors of a long civil war and several smaller attempted insurrections, Sri Lanka is still considered an paradise island. In 2018, Lonely Planet named Sri Lanka the best travel destination of the year, inspiring more than 2.3 million foreign tourists to visit, generating \$4.4 billion or 4.9% of the gross domestic product (Saratha et, 2024). Due to the economy's reliance on tourism, Sri Lanka was extremely vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that halted international travel and tourism. The country's leading exporters, who deal in tea, cashew, crab, and coconut, were also strained by a global economic downturn that saw sales drift. In addition to low sales and tourists, negligent new legislation by corrupt government officials escalated the economic situation. With enormous debt relief payments, the Rajapaksa regime saw an economic opportunity by shifting crop production to strictly organic production, grabbing international headlines in the meanwhile, but the actual motivation was not a dramatic concern for ecological sustainability. The reason why the government demanded all agriculture shift production to organic farming was to dodge a LKR 400 million annual bill on fertilisers (GBP 1 million), but the farmers, not used to the organic processes and the soil maturity required for such a swift change, failed, and the country's primary staple of rice did not yield sufficiently. In the initial post-independence period, Sri Lanka had ambitions to rival Singapore as a post-colonial island that would galvanise to become the economic and cultural powerhouse of the Indian Ocean. Similarly, when I was interviewing people for the startup documentary in 2018, Singapore was often referenced by the wealth-keepers and business visionaries of Sri Lanka as a model the country should have emulated, and the model they still have time to emulate. Whilst ostensibly Sri Lanka has the means to have built a strong economy that could withstand the shock of the pandemic, government

corruption and decades of civil war that have emptied government coffers and caused an enormous amount of brain drain and divestment, leaving the island nation on edge of bankruptcy towards the beginning of 2022.

Sri Lanka's paradoxical identity also materialises with its ambiguous relationship with female emancipation. Sri Lanka has the distinction of the world's second female Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike (you may note the surname from the airport I landed at above). In 1970, she rose to prominence, almost a full decade before Margaret Thatcher in UK, validating the democratic credentials of Sri Lanka's post-colonial independence. In addition, some twenty-five years later, Sirimavo's daughter, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga—commonly referred to by her initials, 'CBK'—became the first female president of Sri Lanka, but these miraculous moments in global political history veil Sri Lanka's troubling relationship with women. In 2017, one of the few hard-hitting articles I made as a journalist in Sri Lanka was about female suicide, which had the second highest count in the world (Ryder, 2017a). Motivated by sexual exploitation and patriarchal systems that shame women, the public was aghast with the findings of my article. On a different occasion, a female Tamil friend, Abigail, said to me, referring to Sri Lanka's various civil wars, that 'Sri Lanka's biggest war is not between the Sinhalese and Tamils, it's its war on women'. In 2021, a female Tamil maid being sexually assaulted and burned alive in the home of a prominent politician should have lifted the lid on endemic of female abuse (Thomas & Pundir, 2021).

The Aragalaya was also paradoxical. It required the country to come close to defaulting on its debts, and a population to almost starve in a nation renowned for its bountiful food and produce, to galvanise and come together. One of the most notable elements between 2022's Aragalaya and previous resistance movements is a cross-island ethnic unity and a deep-seated commitment to peaceful resistance. In a country literally split by

ethnic conflict, a unified people's protest that encompassed all people from across the ethnicity mix, was a groundbreaking move, even for Sri Lanka. To explain the relationship between the digital technology and the rise of information influencers and the people who helped orchestrate the Aragalaya, we have first to map the earlier history of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic violence in the country.

2.3 | The rise of Buddhist Nationalism in Sri Lanka

When the Indian Prince Ravana arrived in Sri Lanka on the back of a lion around 543 BCE, and had relations with an indigenous Vedda women, the Sinhalese people were born, or so says the legend, described in the Mahavamsa, an epic poem, written around the 5th or 6th century CE. Today, the Sinhalese, whom are predominately Theravada Buddhists, are the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, and their claim to indigeneity to the island of Sri Lanka is based on the stories of the Mahavamsa, especially the chronicles on Buddha's visit to the island.

Buddhism has been the primary belief system in Sri Lanka since antiquity, but the advent of Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism did not occur until the mid-nineteenth century and it has proliferated through the twentieth century and appears to be gathering momentum, more so today. It is presumed that Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism (and, in turn, Tamil-Hindu revivalism) may have largely grown in response to colonist aims of proselytising the local populace. However, continuing the theme of the island paradox, historians argue that the Buddhist reformist movement was originally inspired, ironically, by Henry Olcott, the first American to convert to Buddhism, who came to Sri Lanka to establish the Buddhist

Theosophical Society in 1862 (Nuhman, 2016). Shocked that the British had installed Christian missionaries and streams of local people were converting to a foreign and inferior religion, Olcott embarked on an island-wide tour to instate a Buddhist school system. The outcome was a distinct form of Theravada Buddhist that had a confrontational relationship with outsiders and non-believers.

In the post-colonial period, Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism came to a head with the island's minority groups. The British had supposedly favoured Dutch Burghers and Tamils in positions of office, the former, Christians by default, were renowned for their spirited sportsman and alcohol-consumption, in keeping with their European ancestry, and were therefore ideal to help steer the colonial administration, and the latter, the Tamils, some of whom had converted to Christianity, but were mostly Hindu, were seen to be diligent and respectful, and rose to positions of prominence, especially in education, law and medicine. The Sinhalese, on the other hand, were interpreted by the British to be inscrutable and difficult, a residue of the Sinhala King's resoluteness in maintaining the city of Kandy as an autonomous kingdom up until 1815. One of my informants, Bosco, who is a Sinhala-Buddhist but who has an explicitly Portuguese surname, told me that his forefathers changed their family-name to a European-sounding one from Sinhalese, so they were permitted to do business with the British. Thus, when the British left Ceylon, as it was then known in 1948, the Sinhala Nationalists saw an opportunity to consolidate power. In the first years of independence, Sri Lanka's minority ethnicities played important roles in the government and society under the mandate of a trilingual state of Sinhala, Tamil and English. However, an increasingly anxious and authoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism was taking hold. In 1956, founder of the SLFP and national Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, introduced highly controversial and inflammatory legislation. The Sinhala Only Act restricted the use of Tamil and English in

statutory positions, systematically marginalised large numbers of non-Sinhala speaking citizens, including Tamils, Muslims and Christians, especially from accessing university education and positions in government. Many Burghers left Ceylon for Europe, and fissures between the majority Sinhala state and the remaining ethnic minorities widened.

An unintended consequence of 1956's Sinhala Only Act was how it also triggered tensions between the Sinhalese majority, even internally between the Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalists. For an increasingly militant Buddhist establishment, the removal of Tamil and English as municipal languages was not considered firm enough against an increasingly organised ethnic minority class; thus, when prime minister, S.W.R.D Bandaranaike, failed to pursue complete nationalist reforms and ceded concessions to Tamils councils in the North, a Buddhist monk, Talduwe Somarama Thero, entered the home of Bandaranaike in 1959 and assassinated the prime minister with a revolver (Crawley, et al., 2015). This unthinkable turn of events again speaks to the island paradox of Sri Lanka. Buddhist has a worldwide reputation of (rightly) being based on inner peace and harmony with the outside world. The idea of monks with revolvers and the will to murder a Buddhist political leader and ally appears to be antithetical to the very idea of a Buddhist state, let alone the practice of Buddhism in and of itself.

The modern incarnation of Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism that came to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century is based on reformist political parties' conceiving minority rights (i.e. the rights of Tamil, Muslim and Christian communities) as a threat to the sangha and the holiness of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The iconoclastic arson of the Jaffna library in 1981 by a Sinhalese mob—one of the biggest libraries in Asia—was an attempt to systematically remove Tamil's claim of indigeneity through their illustrious literature history. Attacks on Tamil cultural heritage, and the

structural violence Tamil people suffered through racist legislation such as the Sinhala Only Act, galvanised the disparate Tamil communities and resistance formulated in the shape of various political groups, the most prominent of which was the LTTE. The Tamil Tiger's mandate was to establish an autonomous homeland, 'Tamil Eelam', in the north and eastern third of the island, but these demands were never met. While tensions had been simmering for decades, the civil war between the Sri Lanka and the LTTE officially began in July 1983. An ambush by Tamil militants in the north which saw 13 Sinhala soldiers killed was met with mass mob violence in the South and a period known as 'Black July' with the public lynching of Tamils in the streets of Colombo. For the next 26 years, Sri Lankan state and the LTTE committed terrible acts of atrocity against each other, and almost all civilians were in the caught in the crossfire in some way. Supposedly funded by thousands of their émigré brotherhood who had left Sri Lanka following Black July for cities such as London, Sydney and Toronto, the LTTE grew to become one of the fiercest and feared guerilla organisations in the world, maintaining their own air force and sea fleet dubbed the 'Sea Tigers'. Importantly, to maintain connection and sympathy from their global diaspora, media and communications also became integral to the LTTE's machinery.

The LTTE's mission to deliver a self-determined homeland for Tamil people took on extraordinary violent turns, bombing Colombo international airport, killing two Prime Ministers (one Sri Lankan, one Indian), deploying suicide bombers, and recruiting child soldiers, reportedly without consent from Tamil villagers in the night. In addition, LTTE's total commitment for an autonomous Tamil region saw them perform egregious acts of harm against Sri Lanka Moors, a Muslim, Tamil-speaking group who also happen to live in LTTE's proposed zone of Tamil Eelam (McGilvray, 2008). In response, the Sri Lanka state organised by Sinhala Buddhist Nationalists engaged their armed forces and deployed an almost complete annexation

of the Tamil north with land mines. After 26 years of war, in 2009, the Sinhala state, empowered by US surveillance technology and vindicated by the global War on Terror, committed to ending the civil war, unpeacefully (Perera, 2015). In the final weeks, Tamil soldiers and civilians were cornered in 'The Cage'—a wild piece of wetland in the north of the island (Weiss, 2012)—and relentlessly shelled, delivering 'utter military defeat' (Perera, 2015, 75). Trophy videos filmed by Sinhala soldiers on mobile phones have subsequently laid bare the extent of the bloodlust on the ground: masses of blindfolded and bound men executed; women and children brutalised.

Anthropologist, Jonathan Spencer, rejects the 'absurd' claims that the Sinhala and Tamil conflict is 'some colonial invention created *ex nihilo* by Machiavellian colonialists through divide and rule techniques' (Spencer, 1990, p), because tensions between the two major ethnicities of Sri Lanka have been stirring for centuries. The great chronicle of Sri Lanka history, the Mahavamsa, for example, evokes Sinhala triumphalism over the Tamils, foregrounding and celebrating the Sinhala King, Dutugemunu (161 DC to 137 BC) defeat of the Dravidian (Tamil) Chola King Elara. My understanding is that Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism believes that the island of Sri Lanka has always been under threat from colonising forces, including Tamils, Muslims and more recently Europeans, and while Sinhalese power diminished during the colonial period, independence spelled the time for Sinhala-Buddhists to rightly claim their ownership of the island as custodians of the safekeeping of Buddhism and the dharma. To understand how Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism has proliferated through the twentieth century and gathered momentum since the end of the civil war, we need to consider the role of media in the organisation of power and nationalism.

2.4 | Media at War

Famously, Benedict Anderson (1983) instituted the idea the proliferation of nationalism has not so much coincided with the advent of mass media but has been actively expanded via it. According to Anderson, nationalism needs to be understood as an unintended consequence of the 'imagined communities' collectively built by the first newspapers who were vying for political alignment with their readers to sell copies and develop dedicated reading habits. In the case of Sri Lanka and at the beginning of the long civil war between the Sri Lanka state and the LTTE, Sri Lankan scholar Tennekoon (1990) demonstrates how the historical myths of the Mahavamsa and the landmark incidents of Sinhala domination over Tamil people are not situated in the past, but how they are reproduced in the present through nationalistic gerrymandering in the press. Through an analysis of three newspapers debates from 1984, one year into the war, Tennekoon outlines how one of the primary reasons why Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalists cannot cede Jaffna and the northern third of the island to the demands of the Tamil Eelam separatists is because that would be handing them something they never had, evoking a bygone era before the Tamil's kingdom was founded in the thirteen century. By disregarding 800 years of Tamil civilisations on the island, Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalists simultaneously legitimise Sinhalese indigeneity simply because they arrived first.

More recently, when the war was officially ended on 19 May 2009, much of the mainstream media in Sri Lanka solidified the Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism via uncritical, victorious rhetoric. All the Sinhala and English newspaper dailies devoted entire news cycles to the historic victory featuring photographs of jubilant Sinhalese people celebrating in the street and proud photos of the hard-fought army who delivered the glory.

There were no pictures of Tamil people celebrating; indeed, possibly the only Tamil who made the photo collages was the corpse of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the previously indefatigable founder and leader of the LTTE, who's death marked the end of the Tamil military resistance (Izzadeen, 2015).

The numbers of dead, injured and displaced through the war remains ambiguous and contested, and UN investigations into war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan state are ongoing. In the final weeks inside 'the cage' international peacekeeping forces and observers suspect that up to 150,000 Tamil civilians may have been killed (Weiss, 2012). The primary reason why the extent of the carnage has never been fully recorded is because of the Sri Lankan state's tight grip on the media freedoms in the country. Since independence and a period of relative freedom, the government has been increasingly nationalising the media, thereby negating dissent and controlling civil access to information (Ratnatunga, 2015). More than that, the government has served an explicitly violent and intimidating mandate towards journalists and media houses, making the pursuit of truth and justice a dangerous and impossible task. Even the number of journalists killed or disappeared during the war period is underdetermined. Colombo-based researcher Ameen Izzadeen (2015) quotes Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka and says 43 journalists were killed 2004-2010, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2021) quote nineteen individuals were murdered or disappeared in the 10-year period before the end of the war and a further 30 are known to have fled the country in fear of retribution. The most notorious example of a journalist being killed by state sponsored violence was the extraordinary case of Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of *The Sunday Leader*, who was executed outside his home in a wealthy Colombo neighbourhood in January 2009, five months before the war came to its bloody climax in the north. Wickrematunge, who had made a career by

critiquing the government corruption and the war-mongering state, had predicted his own murder in an obituary he wrote and left to published after the fact. He wrote:

'The independent media have increasingly come under attack. Electronic and print institutions have been burned, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed... When finally, I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.'
(Wickrematunge, 2019, para 1-15).

The Sri Lankan government did not always have such an egregious grip on the media systems in the country, but the media has always been under the control of the powerful. It was the Dutch in 1773 who first introduced the printing press to Ceylon, printing pamphlets explaining laws and Christian literature in Sinhala and Tamil. When the British ceded power, they inherited the presses, and in 1802, the *Government Gazette* was to be the first newspaper in Sri Lanka; printed in English only, it was mainly aimed at expatriate community, with news from home and India, with a smattering of local goings on. It was not until 1862 that the first Sinhala language newspaper, *Lakminipahana*, arrived; a tabloid 'with a nationalistic and religious bent aimed at moulding public opinion against domination' (Ratnatunga, 2015). By 1901, 30 newspapers—thirteen in English, ten in Sinhala and seven in Tamil—were in regular circulation catering for a mixed public of approximately 30,000 Europeans, 2.5 Sinhalese and 1 million Tamils. Today, there is a mix of state-owned and private media operations, thereby providing a veneer of media-freedom, but by and large, the independent media have connections in parliament, therefore, there is always someone advising from above what can and cannot be published.

In my experience of being an active journalist in Sri Lanka (2017-18), less than a decade after the war had officially ended in 2009, I observed various

degrees of censorship and media oppression. In the newsroom of the content creating agency where I worked, the team were unofficially unpermitted from talking about the war, and an ingrained self-censorship among my local colleagues ensured that journalists did not pursue stories involving statesmen or those deemed to be powerful. The only time I was permitted to travel to 'the north' was for a story about the lives of fisherman in Mannar, a forgotten coastal backwater that had suffered LTTE and Sri Lanka army occupation at various points in the war. As I did with most of my long-distance stories, I went with a trilingual Tamil photographer, colleague and friend, Shreyans. We had arrived via overnight bus from Colombo and on the second morning, as we looked to leave our low-budget, sleepy guesthouse at dawn to meet some fisherman on the beach, inexplicably, an army vehicle was waiting at outside. Oblivious to the impending drama, when I came out of the guesthouse in the early morning, a state official barked some orders, and I was arrested and placed in the back of the army jeep alongside a team of armed men. I did not find out what was happening for hours, but I had been arrested on suspicion of being human traffic. Apparently, I had been smuggled from India! (Presumably by the fisherman). I was innocent of course and the office of my media organisation had to send a team in a car on the twelve-hour drive to bail me out.

My comprehension of what additional motivations were at play here in Mannar in 2017 was greatly enhanced by my ethnographic fieldwork in 2022. My Aragalaya activist colleagues had invited me to join them on a week-long excursion to the Jaffna, the historic capital of the Tamil kingdom, in the far north of Sri Lanka. All five of my comrades were Sinhalese, four Buddhists and one Christian; they had been radicalized during the Aragalaya and two of them, Bosco and Clara, who feature regularly through the subsequent chapters, had achieved extraordinary fame thanks to their social media content. During the Aragalaya they

camped in tents without access to essential amenities and without returning to their homes for over 3 months in the seething heat of summer in Colombo. In that time, they had shared space with people from the island's minority group, including Tamils from the North and the East. At 'Gota Go Gama', the main protest site, the community of occupying Sri Lankans had set up a multi-faith library and lecture space, where people could educate each other. For the first time, my comrades heard directly about the terrible violence and suffering their Tamil and Muslim countryman had endured over the decades at the hands of the Sri Lankan state and their army. My five colleagues, with a mean age of 27, and who had grown up through the civil war but in the relatively safe city of Colombo, had only inculcated the narrative created by the state media and education system. Bosco explained how previously, 'We believed the Tamils hated us and wanted us killed. We believed Jaffna was dangerous for Sinhalese and if we went there, we would be killed'. The trip to Jaffna was therefore loaded with extraordinary meaning and notions of dual emancipation. Our trip was to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the Aragalaya by traveling to the Tamil north for the first time, to visit Jaffna, meet their fellow countryman face to face and visit the historic landmarks, including war memorials to honour the deceased. Once there we made social media content, including drone footage of Delph Island, encouraging other Sri Lankans, especially their Sinhalese brethren from the south, to see past the decades of governmentally controlled lies, and come and visit Jaffna for themselves.

2.5 | The truth about fake news

Would it be fair to describe the historical inaccuracies that my Aragalaya activist friends had been fed over the course of their lives as 'fake news'? In 2016, fake news became an epochal, buzzword, thanks, in the main, to

the US president campaign of Donald Trump. One tactic Trump employed to aid his rise to power was to target legacy news media associated with democratic politics (e.g. *New Yorks Times* and *The Washington Post*) and accuse them of purposely producing 'fake news' to devalue American politics and promote 'woke' ideals such LGBT rights and climate change that do not actually affect the lives of ordinary working Americans (Farkas & Schou, 2018). His ludicrous firebrand politics also saw him slander his oppositions, alleging that Democrat incumbent President Barack Obama of having been born in Kenya, implying that Obama's presidency was founded on a fraudulent claim to power. As the absurdity of the claims, rumours and lies proliferated, social media was routinely framed as the reason behind this sudden shift to 'post truth' politics. Facebook, in particular, came under intense scrutiny because the platform was harassed to target swing voters and vulnerable people with content produced to maliciously deceive their voting habits (Farkas, Schou & Neumayer, 2018).

Fake news was named the *Collins Dictionary* word of the year in 2017 (Flood, 2017), while the closely related term, post-truth, was selected to be the *Oxford Dictionary* English word of the year in 2016 (Flood, 2016), clearly demonstrating the capricious nature of political discourse at the time. Post-truth refers to the contemporary political climate where objective facts have lost their influence in political rhetoric, while emotions and personal belief appear to galvanise personal support. For example, when Trump implied that Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton in 2016 was involved in a paedophilia cabal via the toxic Pizza Gate conspiracy theory culminating in a crazed Republican supporter attacking a pizza restaurant which the assailant believed was the secret venue for child abuse, the fact there was no evidence of child abuse in the basement of the restaurant has not led to the conspiracy curtailing, because truth, in

the post truth era, is something to be decided, not discovered (Venturini, 2022).

As the post-truth era took hold globally, the Sri Lanka political sphere fizzed with egregious cases of fake news and post-truth politics. A reoccurring fake news story around this time was that Muslims are trying to 'Sterilise the Sinhalese' (Rajagopalan & Nazim, 2018). Since the end of the civil war and with the LTTE crushed, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists have directed their attention to country's other-*other*, the Sri Lankan Muslims, or Moors as they are known locally. Xenophobic groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) led by radical Buddhist monks have identified Islam as an existential threat to Buddhism, and via the adoption of new digital technologies are spreading hatred and inciting the Sinhala public (Silva, 2016). Dedicated Facebook groups are radicalising Sinhala youths (Holgersson Ivarsson, 2019) and memes on Twitter have been especially effective in seeding the anti-Muslim stereotypes of violence against women, paedophilia and terrorism (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2019a). This building fear of Muslims amongst Sinhala Buddhist Nationalists and the bizarre 'sterilisation' conspiracy has provoked several riots and lethal violence against Muslims through 2015-2018 (Rajagopalan & Nazim, 2018).

In April 2019, ten years after the climax of the civil war against the LTTE, Sri Lanka's long running ethnic conflicts came to another, ugly head. In reaction to the increasingly anti-Muslim violence, international Islamist terrorist group, ISIS, abruptly entered the fray, coordinating eight bombs in Christian churches and luxury hotels in Colombo where Easter Sunday was being celebrated killing over 250 people and injuring hundreds more (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2019b). The attack, unprecedented in that it came from beyond the island, suddenly dragged Sri Lanka's internal ethnic violence onto the world stage and put Christians and Western institutions

at the centre of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. In the aftermath, fake news proliferated, accusing Muslims locally of plotting the attack, resulting in more mob violence and murders. The shock of the attack has seen a return to power of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the leader who led the Sinhala state to victory against the LTTE, because his brand of authoritarianism was seen as a stabilising force when the country was on the verge of disarray. I have heard friends and colleagues discuss a conspiracy theory speculating whether the Rajapaksa regime was somehow behind the Easter Sunday Attacks because they have conspicuously benefited from the devastation. Perhaps, not incidentally, in 2020, President Mahinda Rajapaksa instigated a new 'fake news law', criminalising the sharing of false information on social media. The new bill has been used to detain scores of ordinary citizens and several high-profile Muslim bloggers (Chandimal and Fernando, 2020).

The obvious problem with the neologisms of 'fake news' and 'post truth' is how they imply *true* news and a 'truth' era. Another issue is how the terms have become synonymous with social media and are perceived to be an egregious outcome of unregulated digital communications. Critics of social media suggest that in the new 'attention economy', platforms, organised by opaque algorithms, prioritise profit and user engagement over accurate information, therefore incendiary content and polemical commentary thrive in a media ecosystem without sufficient checks and balances (Howard et al. 2020). In addition, the reality-defining filters and cut-and-paste culture afforded by apps such as Instagram and TikTok are confusing what is an accurate representation of reality. There is no doubt that social media platforms have significantly disrupted the traditional mechanism of news production, circulation and consumption, but the notion of a pre-social media 'truth era' and of 'true news' is misleading, to say the least.

In the UK and USA context, for example, the 2001-2 illegal invasion of Iraq was premised on the Iraq's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction. Since, it has been proved that this information was fabricated to qualify the invasion strategy, providing a profound and devastating case of fake news before the social media era. Equally, in Sri Lanka, the 2009 ball-park numbers of the civilians killed in the final weeks of the civil war differ dramatically—from 40,000 to 110,000—as the Sri Lanka government controlled the narrative about their military success against the LTTE, and not their potential war crimes against Tamil citizens (Perera, 2016). It is a similar story for the JVP youth insurrections of 1971 and 1987-89, when state-sponsored death squads disappeared thousands of Sinhala students; the numbers of which are still unknown today but are rumoured to be between 20,000-40,000. Thus, in answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this sub-section, I would suggest that it would be insufficient to label the news my Sri Lanka comrades have grown up believing as 'fake news'. Their pre-Aragalaya understanding of their country's brutal civil war was predicated on narratives instilled by the Sri Lankan state; information that had been specially curated to serve the governments Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist agenda and their grip on power. It would be more accurate to suggest that the production on news and information, in Sri Lanka as everywhere else, is a reproduction of power, and terms such as 'fake news' and 'post-truth' detract from the power at play in news production and are therefore unhelpful in getting us closer to the analysis what is actually happening.

2.6 | Post-Structuralist approaches to news and information

Post-Structuralism begins from the fundamental principle that a universal concept of reality is insufficient to describe the subjective experience of how we humans experience the world around us, but reality and experience is mediated by asymmetrical power relations. Bourdieu's work begins in 1958 and throughout his career he engaged in dialogue with various of his French post-structuralist contemporaries, including Michel Foucault. Bourdieu was less concerned with how power is negotiated through ongoing discursive struggles, or discourse. Rather, he envisaged a world where capital is the vehicle of power. Capital is contested in fields, the venues of power, which demand specific habitus, the outcomes of power. Despite their differences, Bourdieu and Foucault share the common understanding that the social order is constructed through constant contestation—whether through capital or discourse—concluding that there is no objective reality. Therefore, concepts such as truth, knowledge and power, that may seem innate or inert, are perpetually being contested and reinforced by socialisation.

From the outset, my study has acknowledged the contribution of post-structuralist thinking to anthropology and the fundamental poststructuralist principle that information, news and knowledge is socially constructed and culturally imagined. This underlying premise of post-structuralist thinking has had consequential implications for how notions of post-truth and fake news have been scholarly interpreted. For example, Johan Farkas (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020) has made several significant contributions to fake news explorations by making the analytical shift away from *what are* the conditions of truth to *what are* the discourses of truth. By following post-structuralists Laulau and Mouffe, Farkas designates the contemporary buzzword 'fake news' as a floating signifier; the conceptual term used to describe a linguistic formation that does not possess a universally agreed meaning, or, in the case of fake news during the 2016 US presidential election, 'has become the centre of

contemporary political struggles, used as a discursive weapon within competing discourses seeking to delegitimise political opponents” (Farkas, 2018a, 308). A floating signifier is different to a homonym (a word with multiple meanings i.e. dog ‘bark’ and tree ‘bark’), because, as Farkas rightly illustrates, the term fake news belongs to no objective reality as it has two distinct meanings for a polarised electoral. The Republic right, orchestrated by Trump’s outlandish claims, define fake news as the corrupt mass media who push liberal agendas rather than concerns of the *actual* people, whilst the Democratic left, supported by the very media institutions under fire by the Republicans, argue that fake news is internet-based clickbait content produced for financial and political gain.

The legacy of post-structuralist thinking is also useful to critique the *en vogue* term 'post truth'. A 'post truth' era beginning in 2016 automatically puts claims to a truth era, forgoing decades of media manipulation (that very recently legitimised the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and negates a colonial history that has been orchestrated by the powerful against the people of the Global South rationalised by truth claims authenticating White supremacy. Indeed, if the term post-truth situates centuries of Christian-expansion, Black-slavery and, more recently, decades of neoliberalism into a 'truth' era, 'it would seem that the wish to return to an era of truth is a wish to return to an era of uncomplicated whiteness' (Mejia, Beckermann and Sullivan, 2019, 5). Thus, rather than the problematic terms fakes news and post-truth, post structuralist scholarship tends to favour the more instructive terms of disinformation and misinformation; the former indicating false information maliciously produced to mislead the people and the latter refers to bad information shared unknowingly. What is new and useful about the conception of dis/misinformation is that the definitions rely on the agency, or social intent, to determine the credulity of the quality of the information. This distinctive post-structuralist perspective treats information and its various conceits (truth,

falsity, reality) as unstable and malleable to the sociality of who produces, circulates, or consumes it. Therefore, rather than the infeasible post-truth era, 'information disorder' is a more accurate descriptor to portray the breakdown of shared epistemologies in this contemporary era that includes the mass adoption of social media and mobile technologies (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; see also Bounegru et al. 2017 adoption of the term).

Having died in 2002 several years prior to the Web 2.0 explosion and the social media boom, Bourdieu's did not pay attention in his work to digital technologies, but towards the end of his life and career he did turn his critique to media and cultural production; thus, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he would have considered theorising the internet as a logical extension of existing media ecologies (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Bourdieu's theory of cultural production encompasses the triple of concepts he advances and they gain significant analytical currency because they are ontologically symbiotic: capital is acquired and exchanged through habitus, behaviour of which is contingent on the conditions of the field. Fields, as determined by Wacquant, Bourdieu's long-term collaborator, are the numerous and diverse spheres of social life that exist within their own 'distinct microcosms endowed with their own rules, regularities and forms of authorities' (Wacquant, 2007: 269). Spanning time and space, fields are conceptually abstract in that they are not geographically located per se but pertain to specific cultural ecosystems: thus, for the present discussion on fake news, we would be broadly talking about the field of journalism. Fields, however, are non-autonomous in that they overlap, intersect and smaller fields exist within fields; thus, adjacent to the journalism field may be the fields of academia and entertainment, and within the field of journalism may be the fields of newspapers, radio, television. What is critical about fields is that 'constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside the space, which at the same

time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field' (Bourdieu, 1998, 40-41). Thus, the agents who dominate journalistic fields, such as media mogul's, editors-in-chief, and producers, have the capital stockpile (economic *and* symbolic through publications, contacts, awards et al.) to set the rules of the field. Subordinate members of the field such as freelance journalists and copy editors must reproduce the requisite habitus to accumulate capital and advance in the field. Those who are oppressed or marginalised by the field rules may try to resist through innovative behaviours in an attempt to rewrite the *rules, regularities and forms of authorities*. One can see how the arrival of the Web 2.0 era and advent of the social media field has significantly affected the journalistic field because the dominate agents of news production have had their capital accumulation disrupted by all manner of new internet agents: content creators, influencers, bots and so forth.

Arriving some thirty years before the current information disorder, Bourdieu's critique of television, describes how the fields of power reduce the autonomy of agents of news production, ensuring that the mass media favours public approval, exposure and ratings over anti-establishment thinking and critical analysis. In *On Television and Journalism* (1998), Bourdieu makes a compelling critique on the technological advancement of television and how it is corrupting the journalistic field, which in turn affects all areas of cultural production because of journalism's centrality to the social construction of acceptability, importance and taste. This theoretical perspective is built on the premise that, more than any other cultural field that has gone before it, the output of the television field is structured according to commercial value, embodied by the industry's obsession with audience ratings and advertising revenue. Thus, if we assume social media to be the next generation of television insofar as it has massive global reach and take up, and how it is ostensibly democratic,

but it is financially and politically compromised by opaque algorithms and clandestine operating protocols, social media can be situated as a significant new field of cultural production, advancing Bourdieu's ontology into the digital era.

2.7 | Social media, violence and silence

The end of the Sri Lanka civil war in 2009 has opened the door for international investment and coincided with the proliferation of internet connectivity and smartphones. In 2013, there were under one million mobile subscribers in Sri Lanka but by 2024 subscriptions have topped 7.5 million—over 34% of the population—thus, portraying exponential growth (statistica, 2024). The rollout of digital infrastructure through the 2010s has radically altered the information landscape, seeing organised citizen journalism (Groundviews.org), hipster content creators (Roar Media) and self-styled 'influencers' harness social media to build massive followings and renegotiate some of the power dynamics in media production and consumption. Despite this seemingly democratic disruption of information flows in a country with a deeply challenging relationship with media freedoms, social media has also been implicated in serious ethnic violence and the government has chosen to shutdown access to social media several times in moments of crisis's, suggesting that social media does more harm than good.

In March 2018, Sinhala mobs attacked Muslims in several villages around the Central Province capital of Kandy and the eastern town of Ampara, resulting in over twenty mosques and hundreds of homes and businesses being damaged or destroyed (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2021). The trigger to violence was a video recorded on a smartphone and shared widely on Facebook and WhatsApp showing a Muslim restaurant owner confessing

to poisoning the stock of his Sinhala patrons. The confession, later discovered to have been coerced, dovetailed into wider conspiracy narratives that had been brewing online for several years: how Muslims were trying to 'Sterilize the Sinhalese' in a collective attempt to outnumber their Sinhala-Buddhist countrymen and acquire power (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2021; Haniffa, 2016). Following the initial riots, the government's response was to restrict access to specific social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp, across the island for eight days between 7-15th March, 2018 (Freedom House, 2018).

At the time of the internet shutdown, I was working as a journalist for a local Colombo-based news organisation, and I was shocked at how suddenly we were all rendered impuissant by the swift removal of internet access. Moreover, not having access to WhatsApp meant general socialisation with friends and family was difficult, and that week I thought deeply about the role of media and communications in our lives¹. Fourteen months later, in the days and weeks following the devastating 2019 Easter Sunday Attacks, people from all over the island were plunged into fear and loathing, and conspiracy theories about the identity of the assailants, plus their motivations and links to international terror networks, were being debated on social media. Conspiracy theories that had been baking online for years suddenly unfurled IRL as Buddhists attacked Muslims communities in retaliation for the terrorists' attacks. The response from the government, like a year before during the 2018 anti-Muslim riots, was to shutdown internet connectivity. The government's rationale was that mob violence was being coordinated online and hate speech and conspiracies were running wild so restricting access to social media platform was a pragmatic solution. At this point, I was back in the UK, and the knowledge chasm that the shutdown installs is difficult to deal with because it puts everyone, internationally and locally, in an information blackhole. The problem with blocking access to social media meant that

journalists, activists and any ordinary person could not report, record or keep up with the crimes being committed. Given, how several years later, there is still a question mark over the extent of the violence against Muslims in this time, it is difficult for justice and reconciliation to ever be pursued, let alone achieved.

The Sri Lankan government's relationship with internet shutdowns and the value they put on digital communications calls to my mind a memetic illustration by Tanzanian-born political cartoonist, Gado (2021), published following the deplatforming of President Trump from Twitter in response to the 2021 Capitol attacks. The illustration is split into two horizontal halves. The top half – titled 'in the US' – features the familiar caricature of President Trump in a courtroom facing a panel of four judges with the logos of *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* superimposed on them, the judges disapprovingly gesticulating with speech bubbles saying, 'YOU ARE SUSPENDED...!' and 'YOU ARE BANNED!!!', encapsulating Trump's recent removal from Twitter due to his role in inciting the attempted insurrection. In contrast, the bottom half of the strip – titled 'in Uganda' – features the caricature of Ugandan President Museveni, clad in the stereotypical wide-brim hat and holding a machine gun. As the roles reverse, in Uganda it is not the president who is deplatformed by social media companies, rather, President Museveni gestures defiantly at the social media platforms telling them 'YOU ARE SUSPENDED AND BANNED', reflecting the proclivity for leaders of nations in the Global South to unplug access to the internet when civil society goes awry.

The comic-book strip demonstrates the basic contradictions in global and comparative perspectives to social media platform accountability. In the global north, public and scholarly focus on the topic situates social media platforms as the gatekeepers of how content should be moderated and questions the efficacy of algorithmic systems in identifying appropriate

content; leading to legal and philosophical debates related to freedom of speech (Gorwa, 2019; Katzenbach and Ulbrich, 2019; Gillespie et al., 2020). When countries in the Global South are concerned, debates on platform accountability have tended to focus more on the harm social media is causing populations and questions the reactionary government measures in restricting internet freedoms when violence erupts (Dwyer and Molony, 2019; Kperogi 2022). Gado's cartoon thus succinctly captures the many contradictions that have emerged in response to what Gillespie (2018) has called the 'unresolvable tensions' of social media content moderation. He writes that 'these companies are now grappling with how best to be stewards of public culture, a responsibility that was not evident to them at the start ... *the challenges they face are now so deep as to be nearly paradoxical* (Gillespie, 2018, 205; my italics).'

The Sri Lankan government's repressive response to violent ethnic conflict that was triggered and/or sustained by hateful or misleading content on social media that the platforms themselves failed to moderate (i.e. remove) before it had violent consequences, may point to how despotic governments' perceive social media as inherently democratic and therefore see digital communications as counterintuitive for controlling dissenting populations. Indeed, to governments worldwide, internet shutdowns are the trip-switch solution to civic unrest, and they occur with surprising regularity. In India, for example, there were an estimated 380 separate internet shutdowns in the six years between 2014-2020, equating to an average of five individual shutdowns a month (Machante and Stemla, 2020). However, internet shutdowns are not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon, and they are not the case of the internet being turned 'on' or 'off'. In Sri Lanka, shutdowns have been tactically deployed in geo-specific regions and on specific-platforms and websites. The initial anti-Muslim riots of 2018 exploded around the central city of Kandy and the Eastern province of Ampara, and the internet shutdown orchestrated by the

government were provincialized to these specific areas. However, in 2019 when the violence was more widespread following the Easter Sunday Attacks, the government's response was to restrict access across the island, extending the ban to less-popular platforms including Instagram, Snapchat and Viber (Freedom House, 2019). Coincidentally, Twitter remained accessible during both weeks of the scheduled social media shutdowns in 2018 and 2019, and in the following sub-section I would like to consider what, then, was the role of Twitter as the only major social media platform that remained accessible during these moments of extraordinary information blackout.

2.8 | Twitter and Algorithmic Folklore

The reasons why Twitter remained operational during the Sri Lanka government's decision to ban access to various social media platforms in February 2018 and May 2019 remain unclear, but we can assume it is because Twitter is a less popular platform in Sri Lanka and therefore was deemed to have less of influence than other platforms, especially Facebook. However, I discovered that in these times of state overreach and civic unrest, Twitter became a particularly salient place for Sri Lankans to discuss media freedoms and political debate; thus, Twitter emerged as the primary site of my preliminary research.

To gather a deeper understanding of how Sri Lankans responded to having their media freedom's curtailed during the anti-Muslim riots of 2018 and the Easter Sunday Attacks of 2019 and, therefore, foreground my ethnographic research among Sri Lankans who use social media for political participation, I upskilled in computational processes to access the Twitter API and extract data on Twitter conversations around specific

hashtags. By exploring how Sri Lanka social media users responded to draconian policy that delimits their freedom of speech and access to vital information in times of crises, I observed a repertoire of what various internet commentators have called digital 'folk theories' (Toff & Nielsen, 2018; Bishop, 2019, 2020; MacDonald, 2023; Savolainen, 2022). Toff and Nielsen broadly define digital folk theories 'culturally available symbolic resources that people use to make sense of their own media and information practices'. (Toff and Nielsen, 2018, 637) Scholars of digital folk theories share the assumption that there is a kind of information asymmetry that exists between social media platforms and their users, and digital folk theories therefore emerge to fill the void when knowledge or understanding on a digital process or phenomenon is unclear or withheld and has therefore evolved to become a useful concept for comprehending how subaltern populations respond to oppressive abuses of power. Iterations of the concept include the 'algorithmic lore' that YouTube influencers espouse to rationalise their success to their followers (Bishop, 2020) and the algorithmic folklore shared among activists' shadow banned by platforms (Savolainen, 2022, see also Cotter, 2023). Due to the ambiguity of living under a despotic regime that deals in internet shutdowns, an emergent form of digital folk theories surface in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere about the extent of what organised social media affords society.

My preliminary research of hashtag conversations on Twitter during the internet shutdown of the 2019 Easter Sunday Attacks identified two notable folkloric responses to the information chasm on what was happening on the ground in Sri Lanka as the anti-Muslim violence unfolded. The most prominent folkloric response can be placed under the umbrella of '*social media is the problem*'; a mainstream international opinion on content moderation predicated on the understanding that platforms are not seen to be doing enough to protect the public from

harmful and misleading content (Gillespie et al. 2020). One of the most prominent voices identified through the data visualisation procedure was the notorious Facebook whistleblower, Christopher Wylie (2021), who tweeted:

'The government of Sri Lanka has finally shut down Facebook and WhatsApp after the company did nothing to stop their platforms transforming into weapons of hate and violence. How can Mark Zuckerberg's conscience continue to let this happen?'

In 2016, Wylie had made headlines worldwide for releasing documents to *The Guardian* and instigating the controversial Cambridge Analytica scandal that implicated Facebook in unsanctioned data surveillance practices used to specifically target swing voters in the run up to the Brexit referendum in the UK and the US presidency election of Donald Trump. Wylie was included in *Time* 2018 magazine's list of '100 most influential people in the world', and I suspect that having a wholly credible and iconic voice in media freedom debates espouse the '*social media is the problem*' folk theory about the case of Sri Lanka following the Easter Sunday Attacks would galvanise the belief, globally, that Facebook is explicitly culpable for the deadly bombings and ensuing violence in Sri Lanka.

The notion that social media is the driving force behind societal issues, whether for good or bad, is a technologically deterministic perspective that predates digital technology and is a reproduction of widespread moral panics that have tended to plague all major technological revolutions. By studying the dataset closely, I can see that many of the tweets that fell into the '*social media is the problem*' category were strictly focusing on social media's ability to spread misinformation, but these tweeters systematically overlooked social media's equivalent affordance of spreading credible information and being an important mechanism for the

accurate reporting of up-to-date news. Around the same time of the Easter Sunday atrocities in Sri Lanka were unfolding, a terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand saw one lone gunman execute 51 Muslims in a mosque. The two acts of devastating violence were being conflated together on social media due to their relationship with the global spread of Islamophobia and associated violence (Hattotuwa, 2021). For example, US broadcasting organisation, *NPR (National Public Radio)*, which has over eight million followers on Twitter, reported that, 'After attacks in Christchurch and Sri Lanka, New Zealand's prime minister and the president of France say they will lead a global effort to end the use of social media as a tool to promote terrorism' (Ingber, 2019). The '*social media is the problem*' folk theory was gathering widespread popularity thanks to its diverse membership: leading global news organisations, presidents from reputable, Western countries, and even hipster whistleblowers.

According to Toff and Nielsen (2018, 639), digital folk theories 'offer generalised notions, distinct from fact and practice, which purport to capture patterns durable enough that no single experience or piece of evidence will typically falsify them decisively'. The tropes located in the 2019 'the social media is the problem' folk theory were similarly identified in the tweet content during Sri Lanka's 2018 internet shutdown that followed the anti-Muslim riots, thereby making a generalised notion watertight through repetition and iteration. In 2019, an additional theme to the folkloric category was that the Sri Lanka government had repeatedly made special requests to Facebook to improve their content moderation systems, especially in local Sinhala vernacular. A prominent US journalist who worked for *Buzzfeed* at the time, tweeted, 'Sri Lanka begged Facebook to do something about hate speech on its platform. NGOs begged. The government begged. And then the killings started' (Brown, 2018), seemingly landing the entire blame of the anti-Muslim riots on Facebook whilst giving *carte blanche* to the Sri Lankan government's accountability

for the safety of its citizens. Broadly, the problem with this technological deterministic folk theory is that it veils the people, power and money behind the production and dissemination of the technology. What is important about this example from an influential US journalist is that by pointing the finger squarely at Facebook is how it systemically overlooks Sri Lanka's difficult post-colonial history, the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism and the proclivity for ultra-violence amongst ethnic groups. Sri Lankan anthropologist Stanley Tambiah (1996) has previously chartered the prevalence of mob violence on the island documenting numerous and sporadic eruptions of anti-Muslim riots since 1915, running through the twentieth century. We can be sure that digital technologies had nothing to do with these violent and persistent incidents, and therefore would appear to contest the international popular opinion that social media is the fundamental enabler of violence against Muslims following the Easter Sunday Attacks. Indeed, while Facebook has been an important tool for developing Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism amongst Sinhala youth (Holgersson Ivarsson, 2019), strictly blaming Facebook for the rise of violent nationalism misreads the more recent role of the Sri Lanka state in promoting an anti-Muslim stance via legacy media, including television and newspapers, since the end of the Sri Lanka civil war in 2009 (Haniffa, 2016a; Haniffa, 2016b; Holt, 2016).

It is worth noting that the most influential Tweeters behind 'the social media is the problem' folk theory were international journalists and other public-facing figures. But what was the Sri Lankan perspective? In opposition to the *social media is the problem* global mainstream opinion, the lesser, equally folkloric, but discursively antagonistic response can be summarised as '*social media is a lifeline*' folk theory. The principal sentiment of the tweets falling into this category can be summed up by the following tweet from a prominent Sri Lankan activist²:

‘Dear #American journalists: For the love of whatever you hold holy, stop twisting this incident to serve your anti-Facebook techno valley politics. Right now, in a country with tight government controls on trad media, social media is a boon for us. #lka’

Because digital folklore theories are non-homogenous and can 'exist in tension with each other, and sometimes contradict each other' (Toff and Nielsen, 2018, 639), this grassroots perspective turns the *social media is the problem* narrative on its head, explicitly suggesting that social media, regardless of any of its regulatory failings, remains a lifeline to populations that otherwise only have access to state owned and/or heavily censored media environments. What is also interesting about this perspective is how the Sri Lankan tweeter situates the Western media's dramatization of events in Sri Lanka not as a concern for the citizens of a Global South country who are facing the real and urgent dangers of flagrant disinformation and hate speech, but as a vehicle in their own battles against Silicon Valley hegemony and their own agenda against the platformisation of culture. Facebook's exponential growth into myriad avenues of cultural production, and especially into news and journalism, has simultaneously disembowelled legacy media organisations and revolutionised the way news is consumed. Ostensibly, platformisation has meant the democratisation of access insofar as content is offered for free in return for opaque data extraction processes, and the upshot of this, or so the folk theory seems to imply, is that the Western media has been marginalised to such an extent that it is weaponizing the case example of the Easter Sunday Attacks in Sri Lanka in order to further and gather global support towards more stringent regulatory practices for Facebook and its Silicon Valley peers.

Further emphasising the folk theory that '*social media is a lifeline*' is a large group of Sri Lankan tweeters promoting a volunteer group who are working

with 'Sri Lankan authorities and Facebook' to help identify harmful or misleading content and have it removed, thereby curtailing the 'necessity' for social media to be shut down in the first place. The self-designated 'Hate Speech Monitor Group' request fellow users to flag content they deem harmful or misleading and the vigilante group will make a judgement and communicate directly with Facebook and advocate for removal or not. This group of activist-volunteers are operating on the understanding that social media is not the problem causing the violence, per se, rather, hate speech and disinformation are a symptom of wider societal issues including racism, poor media literacy and political polarisation. Moreover, throughout this folk theory there is a latent understanding that the potential benefits provided by social media do not automatically outweigh the negatives, but it will take a collaborative effort between ordinary people, platforms and governmental agencies to negate the harmful effects of digital communications and maximise social media's potential. Broadly, embedded in this collection of tweets are calls for citizens to act 'responsibly' and therefore not share content they suspect may be false or inflammatory. They also state that there are laws in place to incriminate perpetrators of deliberate false information and remind their fellow social media users that for everyone the overall goal should always be 'to keep all Sri Lankans safe'.

One of the clearest benefits of my technical upskilling in computational methods and my experiments with Twitter data around the internet shutdowns is that it allowed me to interrogate the recent history of Sri Lankan social media ecosystem, whilst actively participating in it ethnographically. The visualisation processes also helped me identify influential activist voices in the Twittersphere and therefore who to map for further research collaboration. In the time I was on a research placement at the University of Helsinki to learn the techniques of extracting data from the Twitter API and visualising the data using spatialisation algorithms, the

Aragalaya in Sri Lanka was kicking off, and it is to this monumental moment in modern Sri Lankan history that I now turn to.

2.9 | The Aragalaya and a New Resistance

Towards the end of March 2022, the Aragalaya protests began as small neighbourhood protests in and around Colombo, flourishing into a full-scale 'Gota Go Gama' occupation site on Galle Face Green, one of capital's most iconic landmarks, flanked to the west by the Indian Ocean, luxury hotels all around (some of which were bombed during 2019's Easter Sunday's Attack) and the President's House to the north, which was eventually rushed and occupied by protestors on 9th July. The notable difference between the Aragalaya protests that erupted during the course of my study and previous resistance movements in Sri Lanka, such as those enacted by the LTTE or the JVP, is a cross-island ethnic unity and a deep-seated commitment to peaceful resistance. On my third or fourth encounter with Valli, a climate activist who had also become the one of the most prominent female faces of the Aragalaya thanks to her hardline politics, good-looks, and impressive oratory skills (see *Chapter 7* for more), I tentatively asked, what was her ethnic background? In conversations with other interlocutors I had not had to ask this slightly delicate question because their ethno-religious-linguist background was evident, either through explicit information in their social media content or through the background and origin stories that we would discuss in which they may refer to the Buddhist schoolings or their Muslim upbringings, or some other tell-tale sign. But Valli's ethnicity was unclear to me even after several meetings and discussions, and when I hesitantly inquired, she took a breath, thought for a moment, and eventually replied: 'I'm Sinhala-Buddhist by birth, but I self-identify as a Sri Lankan first and foremost'.

My reading of Valli's somewhat atypical framing of her Sri Lankan identity is in response to years of warring factions between ethnic groups and the sectarian politics of the post-colonial governments. By identifying as Sri Lankan first, Valli is attempting to transcend the popular Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism of many of her fellow countrymen to help unify the disenfranchised Hindu, Christian and Muslim minorities under the umbrella of Sri Lankness. What is also interesting about Valli's self-designation is how it resonates with the formulation of national identity as described by British anthropologist of Sri Lanka, Jonathan Spencer. In an especially provocative article, Spencer (2014) attempts to resituate Sri Lanka away from the traditional trappings of its island-ness and illustrates how the notion of a nation-state is a political imaginary, and in constant contestation between different groups, inside and outside the country. For Spencer, even the idea of an *Anthropology of Sri Lanka* is a moot one, because Sri Lanka, in whatever way it is constructed or deconstructed, is a manifestation of deep historical entanglements. Before the Portuguese colonisation of Sri Lanka beginning in 1505, a portion of the island, especially the East coast, was once tied to the Arakan courts of present-day Burma—over 2,000km away across the Bay of Bengal—through a network of Buddhist polities and flows of monks and material representatives of the Buddha. Equally, Sri Lanka's proximity to south Indian, especially its northern half, has brought a steady stream of Tamils and other Indian ethnicities to the island, ensuring that the island of Sri Lanka has never been independent of Indian people and influence. To emphasise the shift away from an idea of an 'Anthropology of Sri Lanka', Spencer suggests, 'if we attend to the movements of migrants across the Bay of Bengal, we find ourselves thinking in terms of a rather different region, a region which includes Singapore and Penang, as well as Colombo and Kolkata, and therefore a region which undermines the coherence of received ideas about Southeast as well as South Asia.' (Spencer, 2014, 5)

A porous nation-state and an amorphous national identity are antithetical to how Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists envisage their relationship with the island of Sri Lanka. Above, I specifically outlined the 1956 assassination of a Sinhala-Buddhist Prime Minister, S.W.R.D Bandaranaike, by a Sinhala-Buddhist monk, and the two intra-Sinhalese civil wars known locally as 'The Terror' in 1971, and then again in 1987-1989, because it shifts the dial away from the entrenched narrative that Sri Lanka is a nation of warring ethnicities, namely the Sinhalese majority against the minority Tamils and vice-versa. As has also been discussed, the twenty-six-year civil war against the Tamil Tigers was about ethnicity and claims to indigeneity to the island against the Tamil population, but in sporadic moments throughout its post-colonial history, the Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalists have committed atrocious acts of violence against their Sinhala-Buddhist countrymen, especially in the violent crushing of radical Marxist Sinhala youth movement called the JVP who attempted a series of uprisings against state infrastructure.

Through an ethnography of violence and memory, Dana Hughes (2013), shows how the 'intra-group' violence between the Sri Lankan state and the JVP student-led political group complicates conceptual theories of violence which has a propensity to focus on violence against an ethnic or religious other. Hughes claims that the incidents of Sinhala youths rising up against the elder Sinhala community incurring Sinhala state retaliation, 'highlights the flawed nature of one-dimensional 'victim' and 'perpetrator' binaries and emphasises instead the ambiguity and multiple subject positions that often mark people's experiences of violence' (2013, 4). Furthermore, the brutality of the state against its *own* youth illustrates the Sinhala Buddhist state to be not driven by ethno-religious ideology, but hardline necro politics that violently curtail any socialist dissenters that oppose an increasingly economically neoliberal state. The legacy of the first JVP uprising is still being felt today 50+ years on through the draconian

Sri Lanka Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) that was wielded against members of the Aragalaya and some of my closest research participants. Surprisingly, the PTA was a piece of legislation designed *not in* response to the world's most famous and successful terrorist organisation, the LTTE, rather, the PTA was initially enacted in 1979 as a temporary law with a view of suppressing any recurrence of the JVP insurrection of 1971 (Castle, 2022), demonstrating how the Sri Lanka state and its Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist mission is not build strictly on xenophobia and a superiority mandate over ethnic minorities, but it is also motivated by capitalism and exists to throttle left-wing political movements.

The resistance movement of the participants in my research are very different from the JVP young uprising and they are notable in the main for three elements distinct from Sri Lanka's bloody post-colonial era. First, there is a cross-cultural unity that seems to defy the violence and sectarian politics that had gone before. According to Jayadena Uyangoda, a professor of political science at the University of Colombo, 'the present protest movement is not only multi-class, but also multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and diverse in its social bases and ideological orientation' (Uyangoda, 2023, 6). I did not expect for the majority of my research participants to be Sinhalese because when I was in the planning phase of the research in 2020-21, I suspected, notwithstanding the bloody uprising of the JVP in the 1971s and 1987-89 that was violently quashed without remorse, that the study of resistance movements on social media in Sri Lanka would be an engagement project with the countries' ethnic minorities, especially Tamils and Muslims, and maybe even Christians, given 2019's Easter Sunday Attacks. However, the severe finance crisis and associated conditions that led to the Aragalaya were a democratising force insofar as the Sinhala majority who have always been favoured by Sri Lankan state governance were also suffering the drastic economic breakdown and limited access to essential resources as the ethnic

minorities in the country. As a result, the biggest peoples' political movement in Sri Lanka's history that erupted six months into my fieldwork period was not an ethnic minority fighting for civil rights, or a small band of students indoctrinated by Marxist ideology. Rather, the Aragalaya was a culmination of the united suffering of a nation that had been driven to near bankruptcy, and therefore Sinhalese citizens and activists were front and centre of 2022's anti-government protests and long-term occupation of Galle Face Green. In addition, the majority of social media users identified as 'information influencers' via the data visualising method that I deploy (discussed in depth in *Chapter 4*) were Sinhalese; a not unimportant detail hinting at the proclivity of social media to renege on its emancipatory potential and reproduce existing, hierarchies and inequalities.

Second, in addition to the cross-cultural unity of the Aragalaya, what made 2022's anti-government people's protests different from previous resistance movements in Sri Lanka, was a conspicuous commitment to non-violent political participation. When the protestors stormed the Presidents House that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had long since vacated, the protestors turned the luxury facilities into a dahl-kitchen, cooking enormous vats of curry and feeding the masses. The departure from violence as a tool of meaning making, long entrenched in South Asian political protest, was notable and unequivocally in response to decades of extreme violence and sufferings. As I go on to discuss in *Chapter 7*, several key participants of my study and some of the most influential social media influencers and leaders of the Aragalaya, staged a peaceful protest outside of United Nations (UN) building in Colombo to send a message of solidarity to their imprisoned colleague, Wasantha, the leader of the national student union. Additionally, as explored in *Chapter 3* on how and why these young people build influence as form of resistance, many have suffered violence or trauma from the state or society and their position is to advocate change, so their fellow Sri Lankans do suffer the same heavy-

handedness in the future. Only one of my research participants who conspicuously used 'rage' in his social media performance was Bosco, but this was more of his own emotional way of conveying his own chagrin, and his message to his followers was always ultimately peaceful. Another, Ama, admitted that she enjoyed 'shitposting' and winding up Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalists on social media, but her vitriol was more truth-telling than violent intervention.

Third, there is a deep-seated connection to social media and activism on and with digital technologies. In July 2023, as the Aragalaya was culminating, in a special edition of, *Polity*, Sri Lanka's foremost journal for the social sciences, the editors expounded on the interplay between of digital media and protest. They write:

'The smartphone generation took pictures and videos of their actions to supplement the memes that mercilessly pilloried the regime, communicating and organising through social media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) with encouragement and amplification of their actions on electronic media by one private media house'. (Kodikara et al, 2022, 4)

It appears that the three unique elements that made the Aragalaya distinct from other major resistance movements in Sri Lanka since independence have also contributed to its success. Evgeny Morozov (2011, 2013) is an internet critic who found fame writing books that systematically reject utopian rhetoric around digital communications, situating emancipatory narratives as misguided and fallacious. For example, in his campaign against digital activism, he chose wordplay over critique, calling digital activists, 'slacktivists', because, he argues, 'the problem with political activism facilitated by social networking sites is that much of it happens for reasons that have nothing to do one's commitment to ideas and politics in general, but rather to impress one's friends' (Morozov, 2011, 186). Whilst the affordances of platforms allow for the instant support of social

causes on social media, Morozov's argues all that is ostensibly happening is that users are self-promoting their *coolness* to their friends or followers and, in the language of this thesis, trying to increase their own stockpile of digital capital. Given the extraordinary proliferation of social movements born and transformed through social media, from the Arab Spring to #MeToo to Black Lives Matter and most recently the Aragalaya in Sri Lanka, I call Morozov's Slacktivism 'a lazy portmanteau'. Perhaps, when Morozov wrote *The Net Delusion* in 2011 it was too early to make a coherent, empirical argument about what affect social media was going to have on social movements. Or perhaps because he was ideologically engaged in debates with digital optimists such as Clay Shirky who's 2008 book *Here Comes Everyone* predicted that collaboration via social networking tools would dramatically increase political participation for the general betterment of democracy, Morozov maintained an explicitly cynical view of digital technologies, but the past fifteen years have dramatically complicated the popular noughties histrionics on whether social media is a force for good or bad. Clearly, there is no straightforward answer, but my study's thematic thrust will be couched in this old debate via the case study of the Aragalaya in Sri Lanka. My objective, however, will not be so much to answer the question about broader value of social media to activism, but to think deeply about and demonstrate the intrinsic value and contradictions inherent in digital communications.

Having sketched the general framework of how I approach social media and the assertion that Sri Lanka's relationships with social media has developed in a highly nuanced way due to its tumultuous post-colonial relationship with violence, media and resistance, we can now pay attention to the rise of information influencers in the country. Although this emergence can be seen as a part of an older and broader historic experience, as the next chapter will explore, the reasons why people

choose to use social media for political participate and to acquire influence is based on highly idiosyncratic experiences.

CHAPTER 3 Who Becomes an Information Influencer? And Why?

3.1 | Introduction

The reasons why people in Sri Lanka use social media for political participation and the reasons why they strive to accrue followers and therefore influence on social media are inexplicably linked, and they are crucial for understanding their relationship with themselves, their imagined audience, and the platforms that they spent so much of their time engaging with. By drawing on discussions and experiences with participants in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans via the internet, this chapter's breath sprawls the entirety of the 18 months fieldwork period. The previous chapter provided the contextual foundations of why information influencers are becoming an integral element of the Sri Lankan media sphere, and this forthcoming chapter aims to supplement this by providing ethnographic accounts on how activist-influencers themselves reflect on their experiences and their reasons to politically participate via social media and to try to accumulate digital capital. By building on existing academic theories on digital activism and influencer culture, two bodies of work that have rarely intersected despite their centrality in contemporary digital culture studies, the objective of the chapter is to argue that the participants in my study are a new categorisation of social media user that I call 'information influencers'.

Scholarship on digital activism has tended to stress technological explanations for the prevalence for contemporary activist movements because they are mobilised and galvanised via digital technologies. For

example, Manuel Castells' (1996) influential work argued that the way internet communications rely on distributed networks has been mirrored by social movement organisations IRL as many have shifted into dispersed, non-hierarchical formations that are effective in challenging structural and state apparatus that function via traditional top-down power dynamic. Following Castells, various scholars have argued that remote collaboration via digital networks has the capacity to create entities greater than the sum of their parts (see Shirky, 2008). In 2002, Howard Rheingold's excellent study of global social coordination through mobile devices called the rise of new technologically wired activists 'smart mobs'; neatly leaning into the dual meaning of mobs as a large group ready for action and as shorthand for mobile technology. More recently, to account for the increase in political commentators and activists on social media, John Postill (2018), tried to introduce the awkward term, technopolitical nerds, or 'techpol nerds' for short, defined as 'people who operate at the intersection of technology and politics, and who care deeply about the fate of democracy in the digital age' (Postill, 2018, page). While I admire much of these two works, I find both terms to be problematic, but for somewhat different reasons. First, 'mobs', as Sri Lankan anthropologist Stanley Tambiah's (1996) colossal study shows, are deeply aligned with the way violence and punishment is publicly administrated in South Asia, and I therefore resist applying the term to my study given the sporadic tendency for mob violence to suddenly erupt in Sri Lanka, as it did on various occasions against the protestors during the Aragalaya. Second, besides from being semantically cumbersome, 'techpol nerds', does not sum up the participants of my study, moreover, it does not sufficiently deal with the popularity of social media practice. Nerd seems to apply someone who is obsessive in a niche area of interest, but otherwise unpopular and 'uncool'. The people I collaborated were *literally* some of the most popular and most influential citizens in the Sri Lanka, based on a variety of unnerdy factors including good-looks, humour, passion, wordplay, empathy

and so forth. 'Nerd' does not consider the integral identity politics, and the competitive accumulation and exchange of digital capital, that social media platforms actively encourage, and many users thrive on.

Enthusiasm around the potential of digital activism seemed to come to a head in the Arab Spring that unfolded through 2011-12. The various peoples' protest movements across several countries in the Middle East and Northern African region that culminated in the toppling of longstanding despotic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt were seemingly orchestrated by the networked affordances and organising principles of social media platforms Twitter and Facebook (Mason, 2011). Subsequent studies have attempted to dislodge the popular technologically deterministic reportage on the Arab Spring (Hirst, 2012; Iskander, 2012). For example, Gerbaudo (2012) argues against Castells' long-held idea of the digitally mediated non-hierarchical network, ethnographically demonstrating that while the mass occupations of public spaces in Tunisia were publicised via Facebook, they were fundamentally orchestrated by highly influential users who acted as intermediaries between the platform and the public. These 'choreographers', in Gerbaudo's words, were essential to the process of 'constructing an emotional space within which collective action could unfold' (ibid. 5). We can infer therefore that the success of the protest movements was built on traditional top-down power formations that relied on classic tropes such as the cult of an individual, not networked collectively per se.

The literature on influencers has shown an inclination to approach this globally proliferating category of social media users who amass large followings on social media from a Cultural Industries perspective, stressing the exploitative labour practices at the heart of [all] social media activity. 'Influencers' are routinely framed as an ontological development to Thersea Senft's term 'microcelebrity' which she introduced to describe

the exotic cam girls of her research in the noughties' internet sex industry who employed digital technologies such as videos and blogs to 'build the self as a brand' and gain notoriety among their fans. Alice Marwick's (2013) study on early Twitter adopters in Silicon Valley further cemented the practices of microcelebrities into the world of social media by writing about how these users 'life stream' everyday mundanities to generate their own sense of celebrity. Since, the buzzword 'influencers' has replaced the initial theorising on microcelebrity behaviours and has been succinctly defined as 'ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts' (Abidin, 2015, 1). Influencer studies tend to start and finish from the position that social media is a means to monetisation and/or career development, and therefore all social media activity is, in some form, commodified labour (Cirucci, 2018).

More recent studies on the growing cohort of social media influencers have been concerned with 'unintentional celebrification', and how influencers maintain their authenticity in the face of breakneck commercialism (Arnesson, 2022), a condition that my ethnographic observations empathise with. However, where I find limitations in the overemphasis of the commodification of influencer practices insofar as they overlook the broader meaning and implications of the word influence, in the first instance. In his article on 'Digital Work', Gandini (2016) describes influence as 'the ability of an individual to influence the behaviours and opinions of other people online and to induce them to forms of action in a way that echoes the notion of opinion leadership in traditional mass media theory' (Gandini 2016: 38). As such, influence on social media is as much about selling products as it is about selling *ideas*

and this is where I believe a distinction needs to be made about the diversity of capital being exchanged in the politics of platform performance, because economic exchange is only one component of how capital flows in social life *and* on social media. In Bourdieuan terms, we know that social and cultural capital is exchanged through social interaction; thus, the reason we need to establish digital capital as an emergent element in the capital inventory is because of the highly visible datafication processes that underpin how users experience social media and therefore critically impacts how behaviours play out. By being ubiquitous and highly visible via the datafication of follower counts and content engagement analytics, digital capital accumulation and exchange on social media is materially distinct from non-datafied capital interactions such as social and cultural capital exchange IRL.

My ethnographic evidence reproduces several dimensions of what studies on digital activism and social media influence have previously argued, however, it is clear that there is not one straightforward explanation for the complexity of why people in Sri Lanka use social media for political participation, especially in a media sphere that is renowned for its state-sponsored violence against dissidents. **Moreover, what does emerge from my research is a seemingly new motivation for accruing social media influence via digital activism: the desire to reclaim the word 'influence' and 'influencer' from its popular usage around lifestyle influencers whom, as Abidin accurately defines, embed advertorial messages in their content in return for monetisation.** This finding provides one of the chapter's contributions to previous understandings on social media influencers. Broadly, what I found is that there is a not-indiscreet blurring between digital activism and social media influencers insofar as due to the pervasiveness of social media in Sri Lanka; to be an influential activist one needs influence on social media and therefore is made to adopt influencer tactics, whether by deliberate choice or tacit mimicry. However, the

tension between the activist-influencer axis weighs heavy on the mind of activists because to maintain one's integrity as a political node, one must not engage too explicitly in influencer practices. For example, monetising one's brand or content, or simply producing content for the accumulation of digital capital is deemed to be immoral and therefore undermines one's activism. As a result of this newly identified tension between the practices of digital activists and lifestyle influencers, I introduce the term 'information influencers' to address the increasingly blurring of lines between politics and labour. I argue that the new designation of information influencers is useful because it recognises 'the information disorder' (Bounegru et al. 2018) that many of these social media users are actively fighting against because of social media's tendency to afford the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation, whilst also positioning digital activism in recent debates about influencer practices and their motivations.

The chapter is structured into five corresponding sections. The first four sections present ethnographic examples of why information influencers politically participate on social media and why they commit such a significant amount of time and energy to accruing a large following under the four rubrics of 1) Early years trauma, 2) Rage and responsibility, 3) Reclaiming the meaning of influence, and 4) Altruism. The final section situates the conceptualisation of information influencers in the boarder context of global information disorders and influencer studies and calls for further reflections between the blurring division between digital activism and influencer cultures.

3.2 | Early Years Trauma

Several of my research participants took to social media with a political bent due to suffering egregious personal trauma in their earlier years. The abuse they received was often in plain sight and there was no recourse against the assailant or sense of justice for themselves. In almost all occasions the participants described the abuses as systemic; that it was part and parcel of being a Sri Lankan in a deeply unequal and corrupt society. Women were often the victims of sexual harassment from men in positions of power or who arbitrarily treated them as inferior. On all occasions, the police were seen to be inept or themselves complicit in the crimes. The reasons they took to social media was to tell their story, help protect others from future perpetration, and to search for justice.

In 2011, aged 15, Nala was becoming increasingly obsessed with journalism and writing for a public audience. Having been raised by her widowed mother after her father passed away when she was nine years old in a poor fishing community on the coastal area south of Colombo, she had seen and experienced people being exploited, and how injustice became normalised and something people, especially the poorest in society, were made to accept. She always felt like she had something to say, so she started penning handwritten reflections and thought pieces and sending them off to local and national newspapers. To evade detection from her strict Catholic mother, who forbid her from writing these articles, she signed off the pieces under an alias 'Nala', a coupling of the first few letters of her real name and some random letters. The only newspaper initially receptive to her ideas was a local Church newspaper, so long as she wrote about Jesus.

Around this time, although her school prohibited the use of social media, she also started a Facebook account, her first foray into digital communications. Again, because her mother forbade social media, she used her journalistic alias as her name on Facebook to continue the life of

a 'double agent'. And from there she would broadcast her thoughts and perspectives. For the first two-or-three years, she doesn't think anyone noticed, but she didn't mind because writing stuff and getting these injustices off her chest and out of her mind was enough. What kept her going was the need to write everything she saw and how she was feeling about it. Writing, whether as a rejected letter to a newspaper or as a protracted Facebook status update, became her muse and her way of expressing herself. She continued writing no matter whether she got a handful of 'likes', or no-one cared at all.

Some eleven years after she posted her first observations on Facebook, during a discussion at a café near to her home one rainy November evening, Nala opened the Facebook app on her smartphone to show me that yesterday she had reached the extraordinary milestone of 25,000 followers. She felt happy about the achievement, especially the thought that so many people are 'reading' her. She remembered the little girl who kept posting articles to newspapers and who kept getting rejected. Her joy, however, suddenly turned to vitriol as she recalls one traumatic incident when she was only sixteen years old.

The sub-editor of a magazine that she had pitched an article to, contacted Nala via email saying she clearly has very good writing skills and she is very creative, asking can they meet for coffee? She sensed the not-discreet predatory undertone to the message, and she confronted the editor in her reply. He came back, reminding her that she is 'a nobody' in this industry and she has no connections, so she should stop overestimating herself. The editor concluded his email by saying no one is ever going to read her work in this country and, with sexually explicit overtones, told her that she will have to learn in life when to 'bend' if she wants to get anywhere.

Shockingly, the despicable tone and the cruelty of a male professional preventing a young person from progressing in their dream career, happened when Nala was only 16. But being a fighter of injustice, even at such a young age, she did not hold back in her reply. Through email, Nala told him, that 'when I have to 'bend', I will choose a man with a backbone and heart. And when that the day comes, I will do it with so much happiness and joy. You are never going to be that man'. She finally told him, that if no-one is going to be reading her because she won't sleep with him, then she is proud of herself.

Nala's story illustrates how suffering early years trauma served to prompt her commitment to writing and fighting injustice, but the natural pathway into journalism, where she believed she could politically participate, was spoiled by a man abusing his position of power and trying to solicit sex from a teenage girl. It is a coincidence that Facebook proliferated in Sri Lanka around the same time to become a public space to share her experiences and express her views without the traditional barriers to entry; notwithstanding her school and mother forbidding its use. The fact that most girls in Sri Lanka suffer extraordinary cases of abuse from men does not mean that female Sri Lankans suddenly have a safe stage to share their own experiences of male misogyny. Due to fear of repercussions and shame, most cases of female harassment go unspoken. That's why, for years since, Nala's Facebook platform and her accumulation of digital capital has acted as a conduit to many others' women experience of trauma and suffering. Nala retells the narratives of mistreatment and male malpractice that she hears through women she meets in person, but mainly through women approaching her via the direct message (DM) design feature who send her their stories of trauma. This profound use of social media to build female solidarity and call out male abuse by Nala does not come without consequence, however, as she is regularly the victim of abuse, trolling and targeted campaigns to deplatform her¹.

To further illustrate how normalised this kind of asymmetrical power relation is in Sri Lanka, especially between men and women, but also between caste and class, four years later, the sub-editor of the magazine, who has since been promoted to editor of the main national newspaper, contacted Nala and asked her to be regular columnist. Following her success of building a significant stockpile of digital capital on Facebook, Nala is now in demand as a professional journalist. Notably, there was no sign of remorse from the perpetrator in his recruitment email, and of course, Nala had no interest to work with this man.

Another case of female abuse happened to Siri but in different circumstances and with a distinctly different outcome. Siri and a friend, both university students, were heading home to their university boarding accommodation close to the town of Negombo in the Western province. It was April, Sri Lanka's hottest month, the time of Sinhala and Tamil New Year, and it was around 4pm so the sun was on its way down, but it was still broad daylight. Six cars had already pulled up saying let's go, assuming they were prostitutes. A man then came on foot and physically accosted them, touching them inappropriately. Siri and her friend, both undergraduates, screamed, but despite being in plain sight, no one, nor man or women on the street, intervened to either protect the girls or scold the man. Siri, upset and shaken by the ordeal, took to Twitter to call out the systemic abuse against women in Sri Lanka.

At this point, aged only 21, Siri already had a significant stockpile of digital capital on Twitter with over 10,000 followers. Her tweet, which situated the abuse she received in the wider context of female attrition in Sri Lanka, suggested the reason why this happened is because the small town is busy with women working in poor conditions in the garment industry, where they are underpaid, and they are forced into prostitution to supplement their

income. The upshot, in a deeply religious and conservative society, is that men broadly treat women like sexual commodities. By going viral on Twitter, Siri's eloquent tweet provoked a response the following day from Namal Rajapaksa, son of the then incumbent Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa; arguably a conspicuous indication of how digital capital is a metaphor for actual influence. In office as the Minister for Youth and Sports, Namal Rajapaska retweeted Siri's original post, adding, 'Everybody irrespective of gender race or religion has a right to feel safe in #lka', and suggested he will put together a special task force to address the issue. Namal Rajapaksa's promise then went viral, as journalists, activists and influencers across the platform retweeted his post to hold him to account and/or critic an unpopular man deeply tied to a familial political class renowned for its disdain against minority groups, especially Tamils and Muslims. In the meantime, Siri received a call from the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports office, and only two days after his tweet and three days in total from the incident on the street, Siri was at Temple Trees, the official residence of the Prime Minister in Kollupitiya, downtown Colombo, speaking to the most senior politicians in the country about the systemic abuse women face in Sri Lanka.

As these two examples illustrate, the reasons to use social media for political participation are deeply tied to early years trauma and a search for justice, but due to the significantly different stockpiles of digital capital at the time of the abuse, it is unclear of the precise role of digital capital in renegotiating power imbalances for Nala and Siri respectively. Without conclusive evidence it would be conjecture to suggest that Nala's lack of digital capital on Facebook at the time that she was the victim of gross misogyny meant that she did not have the platform to call it out on. However, I can say that the incident further motivated Nala into using social media for truth-telling activities because the field of journalism that she had dreamt of pursuing had been severely debased by the male editor,

which, in turn, galvanised her to become an influential advocate of female equality on Facebook. In the case of Siri, I suggest it would not be inaccurate to surmise that Siri's stockpile of digital capital did empower her to report her experience of sexual harassment on Twitter, and it was her eminent influence that gave her tweet virality, granting it visibility to the most senior politician with a mandate of youth interests who then expedited action to support the cause of wider abuse against women in Sri Lanka.

3.3 | Rage and Responsibility

Historically, narratives on the potential of the internet and advent of widespread digitalisation has been framed in two opposing binary narratives: utopian idealism about the emancipatory potential of the internet vis-a-vis dystopian fear mongering that see digitalisation as an extension and emergent politics of control (Gilbert, 2020). More recently, dystopian perspectives have become entrenched because the platformisation of cultural production is variously framed as some form of exploitative labour that serves the platform capitalism of Silicon Valley and deepens societal polarisation by promoting neoliberal subjectivity of the self (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). The alternative mode of thinking which describes social media in its utopian ideal of enabling people to organise collectively and remotely collaborate (see Shirky, 2008) and transcend the trappings of twentieth century statecraft (Parlow, 1996), has lost much of its enthusiasm since the onset of the 'post truth' condition, a digital sphere marked by the mass proliferation of polemical fake news and hate speech creating deeper political polarisation (Farkas & Schou, 2019). My ethnographic observations suggest, that given the breakneck circulation of information on social media, the Sri Lankans in

my study often flirt between the dystopian and utopian ideals of social media in the same breath or moment, and their motivations for political participation via social media are crouched in opposing utopian/dystopian narratives.

Following on the from early-years trauma as a primary reason motivating political participation via social media and the desire to accrue influence, is the tension between rage and responsibility. Various participants spoke of their rage against the injustices experienced by ordinary Sri Lankans, but many also strive to temper that anger with responsibility. Despite a relative diverse mix of people, my informants were in the main Sinhalese, with some notable Muslim exceptions explored in more detail below, and asides from Siri and Nala mentioned above, who were from lower-income families, my participants were largely from middle-class ². The fact is that only one of my participants were Tamil, the ethnicity that has suffered the most because of the civil war against the separatist freedom fighters, the LTTE, and their vision of establishing an autonomous Tamil state in response to the structural violence implemented by a violent and hegemonic Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist state. The Sinhalese people of my study were sympathetic to Tamil and other minority groups' struggles, and the broader population of the country who have been impoverished due to gross mismanagement and corruption by the political elite that installed the 2022 economic crisis.

In response to my asking, *what motivates you to use social media for political participation?* Ama, a Muslim ex-journalist whom I had worked closely at a news agency with years previously (2017-18), laughed and said, 'Rage'. Not dissimilarly, a male Sinhalese Instagram information influencer, Bosco, who's confrontational video content is often him in selfie-mode ranting about government corruption and oppression, told me that 'anger sells'. His polemics, sometimes well over 10-minutes long, see

him get worked up into a frenzy, eyes bugling, voice shrill, hands wringing. Ama's rage is less conspicuous than Bosco, perhaps, because she is primarily most active on Twitter, a traditionally text-based platform, where Ama quips and 'shitposts' her way around her Twittersphere, taking potshots at Sinhalese nationalists and disproving fake news against Muslims. She tells me this may make her sound like a horrible person ('and sometimes' she says, 'I honestly am'), but it's because there is so many super nationalistic and pro-military Sri Lankans out there that someone must take a stand. In her own words, she 'would go all out in just being really brutal in breaking down their arguments and also being pretty rude to them'. Ama, however, is all too aware that her methods can get her into bad situations. Being a liberal Muslim woman, dressed as she often is, in skinny jeans, Converse sneakers and plaid shirt (*and* without a headscarf), she says in no uncertain terms, 'I am too western for Muslims and I'm too Muslim for the Sinhalese, so anything I say, it just flares up!'

To avoid constant harassment, Ama must balance her rage with responsible posting, especially since she became verified on Twitter, an accreditation granted via application to journalists, politicians and other public figures to verify that their Twitter account is operated by the person described (i.e. it is not a fake account). Perhaps due to her career being based, in part, on her Twitter influence (i.e. digital capital) and her ability to disseminate information, Ama says she needs to maintain a decent demeanour, and she's conflicted about trying to find the balance between projecting a true version of herself while also not being unprofessional. Bosco, however, appears to have a much different experience with social media activism and professional work. His rise to one of the most recognisable faces on Sri Lankan Instagram has been rapid and timely. Before the COVID:19 pandemic, Bosco was working for as a flight attendant for a global airline and had spent the last six years whistle-stopping his way around the world, staying a few nights in a large European

capital like London, before a stop off in a Middle Eastern hub such as Dubai, and then onto a holiday destination in southeast Asia, before doing the roundtrip over and over. During this time, his Instagram page was an eclectic mix of beautiful vistas, cityscapes and parties with friends. But despite the hedonism of his travels, he has no doubt, that this extensive experience of world travel and being away from his family home in Sri Lanka changed the way he saw the world, politically. For example, when he visited the less obvious tourist destination of Ukraine (pre-Russia's invasion), he was amazed by how politically engaged the people were vis-a-vis his experience of Sri Lanka where people 'just smile their way through oppression'. Thus, when COVID:19 hit and international travel was ground to a halt, Bosco's career was truncated, and he returned home to Sri Lanka for the first time in six years. Having also studied at university in Australia prior to becoming a flight attendant, he had spent literally the entirety of his adult life outside of Sri Lanka. Now, suddenly, he was home and in lockdown.

What motivated Bosco to post his first political video was the ennui surrounding Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections in August 2020 which had been postponed twice due to COVID:19 restrictions. Sri Lanka is proud of its heritage as the oldest democracy in Asia, but Bosco was being made aware that around 80% of his friends were planning not to vote in the election due to general apathy about the state of the governance in country, and arguably the world, given the ferocity of the virus. Moreover, his neighbour, who he was being forced to endure thanks to lockdown measures, was 'saying some dumbass things like voting makes no difference'. Prior to his career in the aviation, Bosco had studied a bachelor's in international relations and had learnt about the importance of democratic elections and the detrimental consequences when publics become disenfranchised, and democracy fails. So, he took to his Instagram, normally his space for envy-inducing photos from around the

globe, and spoke with extraordinary passion for four minutes, telling people about the importance of voting to claim their democratic rights. He only intended his friends to see it, only 400-odd followers at the time. But the video 'kind of blew up' and received more than 2,000 views. He got some good feedback, from friends and but also some 'randoms', who told him to talk more about politics on Instagram. It felt good, knowing people enjoyed his rhetoric.

Despite only having limited digital capital when he began speaking about politics on social media, by the time I met Bosco for the first time on a video call, in February 2022, only six months after this first furore into political activism via his Instagram account, he had over 11,000 followers. In that period, he had made over 20 videos and photo-posts across the political spectrum: calling out deforestation programs, advocating for women's rights and demanding for cannabises legalisation. His swift growth in digital capital had also been recognised by the legacy media and he had been featured in several newspapers and on the front page of a glossy supplement magazine of national Sunday newspaper and was being touted in the headline as a 'political influencer'. By the time we meet in person 10 months later in Sri Lanka, the Aragalaya has erupted, dissipated, and Bosco was one of the key figures of the biggest protest movement in Sri Lankan history. Surprisingly, his Instagram fame had not grown much more, only to 12,000 followers, but his followers were loyal. During the Aragalaya he had camped without a break for almost 90 days under the blistering sun and intense rain of Colombo in full occupation of Galle Face Green. In this time, he and his comrades had become deeply indoctrinated into alternative modes of political thinking and realised their ambition of overthrowing the government. In that time, he had documented the occupation experience on Instagram and his feed is full of compelling videos: some of extraordinary comradery and happiness, others violent and gruesome as they are attacked by police and hired mobs. The video of

him holding friends close as they are pounded by water cannon fire by the state police is lodged in my memory.

Since his initial method of rage, Bosco's content has taken on a more responsible tone, although be it still very personal and persuasive, maybe because, he reasoned, he is less angry now the Rajapaksa's are gone. During the Aragalaya and the long nights camping with protestors from all over the island, Bosco met many people from across Sri Lanka's diverse ethnicity-mix who had pilgrimaged to the protest site, and he came to hear firsthand the terrible atrocities that their people had suffered under the Rajapaksa regime decades before. At the Aragalaya protest site, people set up a 'people's library' where clerics and ordinary people from the multi-faith island could learn and talk about their experiences. In March 2023, I travelled with Bosco and a group of his closest friends that he had met during the Aragalaya on a trip Jaffna, for his first ever trip to the Northern Province. Before the Aragalaya, this group of Sinhalese twenty-somethings, had been educated by their schooling, by the government-owned media, and by their elders, that Jaffna and the Northern Province was a war-torn hell zone and off limits for Sinhalese people like them to visit. Ironically, in his 27 years, Bosco, who had travelled extensively around the world several times over, had never travelled 400km north from Colombo in Jaffna. Thus, the motivation for the Jaffna excursion was twofold. First, Bosco and his Sinhalese friends wanted to explore their beautiful island in its entirety and to better understand the true suffering of the Tamil people. Second, they wanted make content about the trip to inspire other people, mainly fellow Sinhalese people from the south of the island, to visit the 'Tamil north' without fear or prejudice. Bosco was taking on the responsibility to use his digital capital to educate his followers and the wider Sinhala public about the destructive lies they had been fed since birth. On the trip, at each historical stop off we took photos, and Bosco would draw on all his historical knowledge to narrate to us about the reality

of what happened at each of these landmarks. When we returned to Colombo after seven days, as planned, Bosco made a hugely positive post on Instagram. Now, there was nothing of the rage and vitriol he was known for. It was an empathic post with glorious photos of us all—on beaches, in boats, amongst old ruins, at Jaffna’s once-destroyed and now-refurbished library—simply saying to his people that the Northern Province is beautiful, not dangerous, it is very welcoming to Sinhalese people, and *you* should visit.

In many ways, Ama and Bosco’s lives, relationships and social media usage are incomparable, but when judged solely on the content produced, they both appear to juggle a balance between rage and responsibility, however, their parameters for successful digital capital negotiation are very different. Ama is made to downplay her rage to avoid trolling and fights with bullies and believes she needs to amplify her responsible tones to acquire work and legitimate herself as an unbiased journalist with integrity. Ama’s rage risks her losing her digital capital, which is closely tied to her economic livelihood, whilst Bosco’s 'instafame'—literally in the sense that it exploded in six months during COVID:19—was built on his ability to articulate himself whilst emotions are running high, and anger is steaming from him. Expected norms around ethnicity and gender may explain why for Bosco, a Sinhalese man, public expressions of rage are more acceptable than those of a Muslim woman. There are additional structural factors at play too, because Twitter and Instagram have different conceptual content standards and affordances. Twitter, whilst also being a place of trolling and horseplay, is mainly a site for the circulation of information and content from professionals in positions of authority to a broader public. Instagram, on the other hand, although undeniably commercial, remains a place for highly personal content that documents the everyday. As these cases examples explore, there are myriad, conflicting factors that contribute to what sort of behaviours help build

digital capital on specific platforms by specific users, promoting my broader observation that there are not any obvious norms or behaviours that guarantee success or failure on social media.

3.4 | Reclaiming that word Influence

Compared to the exceptional media coverage surrounding the Arab Spring across the MENA region in 2011-12, Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya protests received a conspicuous lack of mainstream interest in the global media. In this extraordinary example of people's power against oppression, Bosco, Nala and thousands of other Sri Lankans achieved their primary objective: to end the long reign of Rajapaksa governance. But I want to be clear that the motivation behind my study was not this immense moment in contemporary Sri Lanka history. I began my fieldwork in October 2021, remotely due to the pandemic restrictions, and the Aragalaya started six months later in March 2022. As a result of the severe economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the UK Home Office had banned all but essential travel to Sri Lanka and I therefore only arrived in Sri Lanka for in-person field in October 2022 once travel for ethnographic research was permitted, several months after the Rajapaksa's had been ousted, and new incumbent president Ranil Wickremesinghe, had signed a deal with the IMF to bring in enough credit to purchase essential medicines and fuel. In this period, the Aragalaya had become the principle focus point of many activist colleague's hearts and minds, and therefore my research. But prior to this and the explosive developments of the Aragalaya, my digital ethnography was focusing on tonally different areas of political participation. For example, the reasons for Siri and Nala's political participation on social media motivated by early years trauma predated the Aragalaya, and Ama's balance between rage and responsibility was based the entrenched racism that Muslim's have

suffered in Sri Lanka that were significantly amplified by the 2019's Easter Sunday attacks. In the second half of the chapter, I want to explore the smaller nuances around the reasons why people strive to accrue digital capital on social media through political participation, especially in relation to how they perceive what we can broadly refer to as influencer culture. My objective is to build an argument for the introduction of what I call 'information influencers', a new category of social media influencers who operate in and through political participation rather than monetisation practices.

A recurrent theme among activist-influencers is how their activities, motivations and ethics are significantly different to lifestyle influencers; those social media users who acquire a large following on social media and who commodify their daily life in order to generate income from advertisers and follower donations. My informants generally had extremely positive motivations and aspirations for their social media use, and this was in stark contrast to lifestyle influencers who they perceived as being selfish, vapid and needy. Despite this coarse, emic description of lifestyle influencers, from an outsider perspective the strict distinction between information influencers and lifestyle influencers may appear to be tentative. We know that the incentive to acquire influence affords professional paid work opportunities; Ama, for example, the Muslim ex-journalist introduced above, relies on her Twitter platform to verify herself as a legitimate journalistic operator and to acquire future paid work. Moreover, most if not all of my informants, including Nala, Bosco, Tayyabar, Valli, Lahiru, Siri, Piyanka, Rushma, Amanda and Mariam, had received paid work through or using social media in some way. Thus, it is difficult to clearly separate their political activism from the commodification-affordances of social media practice. However, to produce content and build a following purely for economic gain is seen as intolerable behaviour for most of my informants.

Tola, the one Tamil activist-influencer who agreed to talk to me, said they do not have positive opinions of influencers based on their observations of them in the Sri Lankan media sphere. They strongly believe that people with thousands of eyes on their profiles should choose to use their platforms to benefit their communities in a meaningful way, not to increase consumer spend and fundraise for their own personal livelihoods. Tola is shocked lifestyle influencers with a large following have no words of solidarity for vulnerable groups in their home country who make up the audience that grants them their influence, wealth and status, 'because being political could jeopardise their audience of future clients'. Tola concedes people have the right to post what they want on their personal profiles, but they stand by the opinion that if one has a big platform, you should be putting it to better use.

Explaining her disdain for lifestyle influencers, Ama refers to the cabal of influencers who promote Sri Lankan tourism and work with the official Sri Lanka tourism board and/or a raft of private enterprises. She recalls influencers promoting tea-plucking experiences from the Hill Country by feigning doing 'work' alongside the impoverished Malayaga Tamil communities who have worked the tea plantations since the British Empire bought Indian Tamils from Tamil Nadu in South India to Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century under the condition of indentured labour. Ama calls this kind of content produced by influencers 'poverty porn' because it promotes the attrition of ordinary people's lives as somehow photogenic and something to be *experienced*. Upcountry Tamils, as they are widely known, are some of the poorest and most marginalised people in Sri Lanka, and they suffer structural inequalities that does not recognise their citizenship thereby reducing the access to basic services. Tamil children in the Hill Country have the lowest school attendance (and provisions) in the country as many of forced to help their mothers pluck the tea

plantations (Ryder, 2017). Alcoholism and domestic violence are rife in these marginalised communities, and Ama is visibly annoyed describing the conditions, showing restraint when she calls the influencers who promote this experience as only 'insensitive' and 'naive'. She says the women working the tea plantations are paid approximately 750 rupees a day (less than £1) for backbreaking work, while the influencers charge up to 50,000 rupees (£100) per Instagram post.

When talking about influence culture more broadly, another female Muslim information influencer, Misbah, questions the environmental costs of lifestyle influencers' work. Misbah often finds herself thinking, '*where do all these images and videos go?*' as she questions where are the actual servers that store all of humanity's digital detritus, and is this all not a colossal waste of electricity and space? The worst thing, she says, is that no one is talking about how (un)sustainable digital technologies are as we continue to produce more and more content.

In general, many information influencers speak about lifestyle influencers with a hint of disdain, however many also had friends and connections who were lifestyle influencers that therefore tested their intolerance of them. One lifestyle influencer had garnered much respect amongst the activist community because she had joined the Aragalaya protests and camped alongside them at the main occupation site at 'Go Gota Gama'. Praseema, who has 135,000 (and counting) followers on both Instagram and TikTok equating to over 280,000 followers, making her one of the most successful lifestyle influencers in Sri Lanka, is known for her striking beauty and the sponsored content she produces for aspirational fashion brands and restaurants. When I met Praseema, first at the Community Assembly political meet up (explored later in *Chapter 7*), and then at Barefoot Café, a popular neighbourhood café renowned for its adjacent store and ethical production lines, for a coffee and casual conversation, I learnt more about

the reality of a lifestyle influencer and what she risked to join the 2022 anti-government protests. Having previously had a short career in TV advertising and modelling, as an entrepreneurial young woman, Praseema, had since built her own brand and business, that relied, ostensibly on her body, but also on her brain. Her proudest professional moment came when she was asked to promote the Shangri-La hotel in near Galle Face Green in central Colombo: South Asia's first 7-star hotel. Reviewing the streams of photos and videos on her TikTok and Instagram timelines, arguably, however, the most striking content comes during the Aragalaya, when she is photographed seated and visibly dazed, with her arm in a sling, having been caught up in a melee between police, mobs and protestors. Many of the protestors who were on the front line of Galle Face Green suffered beatings at the hands of state apparatus and mobs employed by the government to violently disperse protests. As one of the leading lifestyle influencers in Sri Lanka, Praseema, was not only risking her health and wellbeing during the protests, but also her career. By becoming affiliated with the Aragalaya, with its implicitly leftwing, anticapitalism politics she was compromising her brand alignment and future work. Still, she says, it was worth it to fight for Sri Lanka, even if she has lost '10,000-20,000 followers' since posting content about the Aragalaya.

While the example of Praseema and her bold shift from monetisation to activism during the Aragalaya serves as an extraordinary exception, her experience humanises a lifestyle influencer-cohort that are generally sneered at by the activist community. Then again, I also observed that many activists had tacit admiration for influencers because their tactics and methods of developing large followership's and maintaining high levels of engagements served as a blueprint for their own success. So, while activists may lambast influencers as vapid and lament their tendency to eat up attention in the competitive space of social media,

there was learnings to be had from understanding lifestyle influencer tactics and experiences.

The fundamental learning, here, is that there is an implicit tension between the two cohorts of lifestyle influencers and digital activists, or those I call information influencers, and the two groups are not quite as singular as first held.

3.5 | Altruism

The lack of justice and financial security for many marginalised communities in Sri Lanka, especially those minority groups who suffer maltreatment from a nationalistic Sinhala-Buddhist state, motivates many information influencers into profound acts of altruism. Muna, for example, is a highly regarded Sri Lankan journalist who has a large social media following on Twitter, growing from around 30,000 followers when we first met online in November 2021 to nearly 70,000 after the Aragalaya. She has been working in journalism for over twenty years and being in her forties she is the oldest participant in my study. Muna was the former editor of two national newspapers, but both of which have been shut down due to 'political reasons'. One of the newspapers, *The Sunday Leader*, was the same publication managed previously by Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor who was mercilessly assassinated outside his home in an affluent Colombo neighbourhood in January 2009, as the Sri Lankan state increased its offensive against the liberal media as it looked to crush the LTTE in the final months of the civil war. Today, due to dwindling media freedoms in Sri Lanka, Muna, is a freelance journalist for various international media outlets and has bylines for numerous newspapers and websites from the US and Middle East.

Via zoom call, Muna explains how she regularly mobilises her digital capital for philanthropic fundraising to support marginalised groups or individuals in need; for example, to help a family in desperate need of expensive medical treatment or education tuition for a child or young person. During the COVID:19 pandemic, she crowdsourced somewhere between '2-3 million laks' (approximately £6,000) across 25 individual fundraising projects; a not-insignificant sum in a country suffering the worst economic crisis of its history. She says she has an 'amazing following' because when she starts a fundraising campaign, the exchange is built on trust. In a recent campaign to provide 50+ Tamil school children in the north with bags and shoes, 90% of her followers who contributed were strangers to Muna insofar as she had never met them IRL. To build trust amongst her diverse following, she always makes a conspicuous effort to record all the bank transactions and photographs the bank slips and posts them on her Twitter feed for full transparency and accountability. On a professional level, Muna concedes that she is mostly known for criticising the government (and opposition) from her social media platform, so what she finds surprisingly and reaffirming about her fundraising experiences, is that she is still able to do something constructive in collaboration with followers who might not necessarily agree with her politics.

The instance of using one's digital capital to fundraise for the poor was not only reserved for one information influencer in my study, or someone who may be euphemised as an 'old head'. Siri, the youngest person in my study, uses her platform to fundraise for social work projects to the value of 10 'laks' (or the equivalent \$2,500); impressive for an undergraduate student from a working-class background in the rural heartland of the country who does not have the privilege of a wealthy Colombo network. Rusham, an economist working for an international software engineering house, uses


her WordPress blog and Twitter platform to publish 'dumbed down' economics-related content so ordinary people can understand complicated fiscal phenomena such as inflation and debt-reinstalments that have crippled the Sri Lanka economy in recent years, to fundraise for struggling families during the pandemic.

The integrity of using one's platform for altruism was in contention to one influencer of my study who became very unpopular amongst the wider activist network that I was collaborating with closely, so much so, that I had to curtail working with him to save risking my relationships with other participants. I had become drawn to Zeem's content because he was often on the frontline of the viral photos of the Aragalaya. There he was, clad in bandana and photogenic histrionics, one arm raised in defiance, yelling into a megaphone, cajoling a huge crowd. When I mentioned to some of my closest research participants that I was been communicating with Zeem online and I was traveling to his village on the south coast to spend time with Zeem to get to know his digital activism practices, they warned me not to. One told me that he was a 'creep' and had been harassing a Maldivian activist; someone I had previously met and interviewed for an international migrant's perspective on the Sri Lanka media sphere. Another told me Zeem had used the Aragalaya to impress girls and always bought dates to the protest site to show off how cool he was, but, they said, during the whole 90 days of occupation, he never once slept there, and would leave in a vehicle to return to a comfy bed somewhere in Colombo. At this point, all these comments were hearsay to me, but I was aware that dispute and jealousy amongst ethnographic participants is not uncommon and can have detrimental effects on the ability to conduct fieldwork, leading me to postpone my trip to meet him in person. Soon after, Zeem did something foolish on social media that became the talk of the influencer-activist community that I was embedded into in Colombo and on social media. Zeem had started his own *GoFundMe* page, a

centralised, crowdfunding website normally employed to fundraise for charitable affairs, asking his fellow countrymen to donate cash to him so he could afford a flight to the Middle East. In his *GoFundMe* pitch, Zeem emphasised his involvement in the Aragalaya, suggesting he had scarified himself for the nation but now had nothing to show for it. Valli, a climate activist who was deeply involved in the Aragalaya, was furious that Zeem had used an Aragalaya photo in this mercenary campaign with her in the shot and publicly demanded he take it down. Many of my colleagues were aghast: not only did Zeem have a degree in engineering, so work was always going to be available and well paid, but he came from a wealthy background. More to the point, he had broken some sort of activist code. First, do not use your influence for explicit finance gain. Second, do not place yourself ahead of those more in need of yourself.

Earlier, I had mentioned that popular and scholar discussions on social media had reneged on the utopian rhetoric that had imbued early sensationism about digital communications, because social media is perceived to have bought an increase in societal division largely through the proliferation of dis/misinformation and hate speech. Regardless of this globally populist view, I often observed a utopian spirit to how Sri Lanka information influencers use social media, and how they believe others should too. Furthermore, as social media is not separate or distinct from IRL (Miller & Slater, 2000; Miller, et al. 2016), healthy social media practice should in some way reflect or reproduce the social world more broadly. Above, Amarilla said, all social media users have a right to say what they want on their personal platforms, but influential users also have a duty to use it in a meaningful way, to show leadership and solidarity to vulnerable groups, so that altruism and decency become the expected norms of platform culture. Because social media does not come with an instruction manual, indeed, the black box of its algorithmic moderating systems are opaque to everyone, even the software engineers who operate it, users are

thrown into a 'plug and play' environment that tacitly requests users rely on fellow users to demonstrate what are the appropriate behaviours. Due to the most influential users having the most visibility, novel and everyday users are force fed behaviours of the people who have the greatest accumulation of digital capital: normatively celebrities and lifestyle influencers. Thus, all social media user become microcelebrities in our own way because the accrual of digital capital is the only explicit way of achieving visibility, the de facto affordance of dialogical communications.

What my ethnographic descriptions of altruism from Manu and Siri demonstrate, alongside the public lambasting of Zeem's opportunistic behaviour, is that the information influencers of Sri Lanka are tacitly aware that mimicry is an integral element of social media behaviour, and therefore by acting with benevolence, they can influence their followers and fellow users into similar behaviours. Indeed, while the altruism of Muna and Siri are explicit case examples of do-gooding, I also observed more everyday practices by Bosco, Nala and other influential colleagues, who would constantly heart emoji  and respond with kindness, even to the most aggressive of interactions, that serve to build their idealistic perspective of what should the social media sphere could be. Zeem, by contrast, inverted the utopian vision of how social media should be used for digital activism in Sri Lanka, and, as a result, he was ostracised by the activist community who he was previously actively a part of.

3.6 | Inaugurating information influencers

The reasons why the Sri Lankan people of my study are using social media for political participation and the reasons why they strive to accrue followers and therefore influence on social media are difficult to untangle

because they are inexplicably linked; to politically participate without accruing followings would almost certainly entail that the activism would have less impact. I have presented the reasons for their participation and their drive for social media influence under the four rubrics of early years trauma, rage and responsibility, reclaiming the word influence, and finally, altruism. What is perhaps interesting about these four categories is that they are notably porous with no influencer being bound to one discreet reason and almost all participants demonstrating ethnographic evidence of the four categorisations. An additional dimension that I need to add to the categorisation is the violent and vivid historic moments that have marked the Sri Lankan experience over the past approximately fifteen-twenty years which have coincided with the advent of internet-enabled communications in the country, many of which have been covered in some detail in the previous chapter's contextual overview of Sri Lanka. Since the advent of digital technology starting in 2002 and gaining widespread popularity and mobility ever since, Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war came to a bloody climax in 2009, and following this, a period of relative peace and stability was punctured by violent anti-Muslim riots (2014, 2016, 2018) engendered by the swell in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and resulting in the devastating Easter Sunday bombings in 2019. Shortly after, in 2020, the COVID:19 pandemic hit, culminating in the economic crisis that led to the Aragalaya. Almost all conversations I had with an information influencer would reference at least one of these historic moments and how this relates to their social media usage and their activism.

For example, the information influencer with the highest count of digital capital in my study (and I can confidently say in the entire Sri Lanka social media ecosystem) has a follower count into the hundreds of thousands, and the seeds of Dhammika's enormous Twitter following were sown in the final months of the civil war in 2009 when he was enabled to 'break the news' from the frontline thanks to his contacts in the Sri Lanka army. With

the war raging in the Tamil north and journalists unpermitted from the reporting on the unfolding conflict, Dhammika's personal network of friends in the army would text him titbits of information, enabling him to release (vague) information about where battles were taking place. Although his accounts were brief in the form of 144-character tweets and he did not go into any graphic or compelling detail, his tweets remained extraordinary to a mediasphere starved of non-State-authorised information. Different in scales to Dhammika's digital capital accumulation, but equally connected to the historical imposition of the time, Muna, Ama, Misbah, the three female Muslim individuals of my study, were all heavily motivated into the world of information influencing on Twitter by the dirge of racist rhetoric in the local media sphere, especially around sporadic eruptions of anti-Muslim riots and the destructive Easter Sunday Attacks. And as I described above, Bosco, the Instagram influencer, threw himself into political participation via video rants at the height of the COVID lockdown when interest into local elections was dwindling. I would emphasise that all these highly active and influential social media users are motivated by the lack of quality or truthful information available in the local media environment, especially around incidents of political and social importance.

These additional examples accentuate a tension I am grappling with as I aim to introduce the new cohort I am calling 'information influencers' to the literature on digital activism and lifestyle influencers. Is this cohort a unique and highly nuanced response to the unique and highly nuanced historic events in Sri Lanka? Or does this type of digital activist exist elsewhere? Is it a condition of South Asia, or maybe information influencers are only prevalent in countries that have suffered civil wars and egregious harms against journalistic freedoms during the digitalisation of the media sphere? Or perhaps information influencers exist in internet communities all over the world? As an ethnographer of social media in Sri

Lanka it is not my objective to answer these questions, not at this stage at least, but my intention is to provide the conceptual lens and language so others can test its validity in other geographic contexts and social milieu.

Information influencer is new term to describe a cohort of social media users who explicitly use their platform for political participation and who actively pursue the accumulation of digital capital by adopting influencer tactics. The intensity and direction of their activism varies greatly, and my ethnographic evidence spans the whole political spectrum including, fighting racism, striving for equality and female rights, environment advocacy and disproving fake news. The influencer tactics they employ may be deliberate and explicit, insofar as the information influencer is aware that certain behaviours will stimulate follower engagement. However, the influencer tactics employed by activists may also be clandestine or by chance, as the affordances of social media design features are configured to trigger these user behaviours for the accumulation of followers and digital capital (explored in detail in *Chapter 5*). One of the reasons why the term works and contributes to the existing literature is because it situates information influencers between the widespread scholarship on the information disorder (Bounegru et al. 2018) and the burgeoning studies on influencer culture. As I described in *Chapter 2*, Donald Trump's firebrand politics and the controversial Brexit referendum placed the role of digital communications in the production, circulation and consumption of information under the spotlight, but the onset of 'fake news' and the 'post truth' era is not a condition of Western information ecosystems. Since 2016, populations globally, from Brazil to India, have elected populist leaders who have had a similar distrust for 'truth'. In Sri Lanka, following the shocking April 2019 Easter Sunday attacks and a slew of political fearmongering against the minority Muslim population, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was voted in as Sri Lanka President.

Following Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi and numerous populists' leaders worldwide, Rajapaksa began a new war on information.

In addition, the term information influencers is useful as it explicitly situates digital activism into the space of influencer studies (for the first time by my reckoning). Given the pervasiveness of influencers on social media, and in the wider public imagination—influencer is reported to be the number #1 career aspiration for schoolchildren in UK—lifestyle influencer studies have proliferated to account for the exploitative labour processes of building a large following on social media and monetising one's everyday practices. Crystal Abidin has successfully theorised influencers as 'ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts' (Abidin, 2015; 1). This definition is accurate, but only if it categorises a specific type of influencer: *lifestyle* influencers. The influencers of my study are similar insofar as they engage in 'visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016;) *through textual and visual narration of their experience*; for example, regularly updating their profile pictures to show them in positions of authority, such as speaking on stage to a listening crowd, emphasising their *influence* IRL. However, where the cohort differs dramatically from the traditional lifestyle influencers is that they refuse making content for purely monetisation, instead opting for political advocacy over brand-alignment.

I argue social media influencers who use their platforms for explicit political participation need to be reconceptualised into a separate category than those who commodify their everyday practices to sell lifestyle products and services. As my empirical evidence suggests, one of the principal motivations for information influencer operations is to

decolonise the social media space away from vapid consumerism and the associated tropes of lifestyle influencers. But the tension between the two groups exists because information influencers have to adopt, by decision or chance, influencer tactics to compete in the highly competitive attention economy. Moreover, the digital capital that they accumulate is interpreted to be highly lucrative to commercial enterprises, whether in their existing fields of journalism and marketing, or to prospective commodities looking to harness influencer digital capital for visibility. In the case of Lahiru, Bosco, Nala, Siri and various other information influencers of my study, the reasons why they spend vast amount of time and energy producing content is to fight injustice, support lower income communities and reinvent social media in its utopian ideal. The shortcoming of existing influencer studies is that they tend to approach influencers in the Cultural Industries perspective, seeing the accumulation of influence as an exploitative labour practice, but what happens when influencers resist the lure of economic incentives and/or use their digital capital for political purposes? The Sri Lankans I spent time with do not see their activism as an exploitive labour practice, but closer to an act of altruism that comes with unpredictable benefits and limitations.

As outlined in *Chapter 1*, since the exploratory Twitter data visualisation and analysis procedure that I conducted around pertinent hashtags during two moments of crisis and internet shutdown in Sri Lanka (2018 anti-Muslim riots and 2019 Easter Sunday Attack), my hypothesis has always been that social media platforms such as Twitter offer a novel participatory meeting place for many Sri Lanka citizens disenfranchised with the current political and media status quo, especially because of decades of state sponsored violence against journalists and media institutions during the Sri Lanka's long civil war has created a problematic information disorder. To some degree, this hypothesis is grounded in truth insofar as this

provides a contextual backdrop for why activism has a special recourse in Sri Lanka, but the actual reasons for information influencers' individual political participation are much more personally motivated and specific to their unique life trajectories. Yes, there are recurring themes: both Nala and Siri experienced early years trauma via not dissimilar egregious misogyny, Ama and Bosco have to find the balance between rage and responsibilities but for largely different, gendered and ethnic, reasons, and Mariam's altruism is a specific example of a wider notion of digital utopianism shared by many information influencers. What perhaps is most interesting in my findings however is the seemingly new motivation of accumulating large sums of digital capital is to reclaim the notion of online influence away from its vernacular usage around product monetisation, to its original meaning of politically influencing 'the behaviour and opinions of other people and induce them into forms of action' (Gandini, 2016, 38). I would suggest that these four rubrics fall under a broader understanding of political activism motivated by building a better world; a world, we should recognise, that combines an entanglement of the IRL and the online milieu into one complete whole. Influencers appear to operate that by building a healthy online environment they will be build a better world IRL, which I observe, contributes to an increasing blurring between the entrenched online/offline worlds.

Because the circumstances and motivations of information influencer practices are so diverse, it is a challenge to succinctly theorise. However, the apparent complexity of the people of my study should not be considered a limitation, rather it is a demonstration of the value of deep, long term ethnographic engagement with participants.

CHAPTER 4 Decolonising Data: A datafied approach to the study of digital capital on social media

4.1 | Introduction

In this chapter I advance the term digital capital as useful heuristic for ethnographic engagement in the complex, emergent processes of influence on social media through its traces in digital data. The previous chapter introduced many of the people who participated in my study and made the argument that this cohort should be considered as a new categorisation of social media user that I call 'information influencers' because of their complicated relationship with dis/misinformation and the tactics they employ to increase their social media visibility resemble those of lifestyle influencers. Now I wish to turn the attention onto how data unfolds in the lives of the Sri Lankan information influencers I spent up to 18 months collaborating with on social media and IRL in Sri Lanka. The platformisation of information and the rise of so-called 'influencers' on social media intersects numerous areas of public life, not least, how information circulates, how brands advertise their products and what careers young people aspire towards. Big data underpins almost all forms of our experience of digital formations, from what content we see on social media to what products and services we have access to via search engines and the apps on our smart phones. Under the rubric of digital capital, this chapter corroborates influence and big data to investigate how one extrapolates the other, and vice-versa. The objective is to show how a datafied approach to studying social media influence can help breakdown

this normatively intractable phenomena, and potentially mobilise a decolonise approach to how anthropology engages with big data.

What is the relationship of big data to colonialism and how does an emergent phenomenon coalesce with a historical one? In the book, 'The Costs of Connection', authors Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) make the compelling argument that the way the contemporary digital ecosystem has been organised for the automated extraction and reappropriation of big data is installing a new form of colonialism. By coining the term 'data colonialism' they are not simply looking for a provocative metaphor, rather, they convincingly demonstrate capitalism's historic relationship with the extraction of resources is being renewed and perpetuated through the 'external appropriation of data on terms that are partly or wholly beyond the control of the person to whom the data relates' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, 5). Even the most innate and commonplace of human activity, from child rearing and menstruation to sleeping and drinking water, are being made subject to surveillance through smart devices for the accumulation of data. What is at stake here cannot be underestimated. Previously, the tendrils economic of capital were demarcated from various elements of human activity but increasingly all manner of activity is being opened-up for datafied profitability (ibid). In a pervasive and perpetual feedback loop, social media platforms harvest and triangulate data of our online habits and interactions and sell the data to interested parties to deliver preferential product advertisements and hyper targeted political messaging for the express purpose of profit extraction and to manufacture consent and curtail dissent. Due to big data's increasing importance in how the social world is organised there has been an emergent interest in big data as an ethnographically significant subject and as anticipated in the *Introduction*, this is a turning point in the thesis' argument. This is the chapter where big data and its opaque processes are explored empirically through the methodological innovation of augmented ethnography. In a

world where most interactions with digital platforms are subjected to datafication processes, by technically upskilling and acquiring the skills to extract data from social media platforms that the Sri Lankans of my study are using, I establish a novel perspective on social media influence and the data that appears to underpin it.

In previous chapters I have described the pervasiveness of influence on social media and how the emergent phenomenon has been approached anthropologically, critiquing that one of the shortcomings of the approach so far as been treating influence from a Cultural Industries perspective, thereby only considering the economics of platform performance. To remedy the shortcoming, I introduced the Bordieuan term digital capital to capture the implicit symbolic exchange of capital between users and suggest this is a useful term because it spotlights the paradoxical highly visible and explicitly opaque datafied processes at the heart of platform culture. One of the expressions of this chapter and its deployment of computation processes to extract and visualise digital capital is to highlight a second shortcoming in the broader social science of social media, concerning the resistance to using digital methods for the study and analysis of influencer cultures. Innovative research (Howard & Woolley, 2016; Howard, Woolley & Caloc, 2018) on Twitter using computational methods found that a ratio of 1:1 of tweet-conversations is mediated through bots. Bots are algorithmically controlled computer programs designed to do specific tasks online such as intimate a human interlocuter (Omena et al, 2024) and internet scholars have been emphasising the need for more technical approaches to social media because the data visibly purported by the platforms are prone to inflation via bots, nefarious agents and opaque practices (Howard & Woolley, 2016; Howard, Woolley & Caloc, 2018). As a result, my hypothesis at the beginning of my ethnographic fieldwork was that the deployment of computation methods should have significant implications for how

influence is interpreted on social media. An early research question was, if we suspect that bots populate a significant proportion (50%) of active social media interactions, what does this imply about the state of social media influence in Sri Lanka?

An emergent theme in this chapter's ethnographic descriptions below is the prevalence of bots and hacking in the Sri Lanka social media ecosystem. Hacking has a long history in digital cultures studies and have been variously framed along three persistent thematics: 1) a male domain, 2) a technical form of resistance against hegemonic or oppressive forces 3) and libertarian in spirit insofar as hackers have stringent beliefs in freedom of speech and access to information that whilst playing to an democratic ideal they are often deeply tied to neoliberal notions of individual brilliance and meritocracy ((Coleman & Jandric, 2019). Departing from this traditional description of what constitutes hacking, Hannah Knox suggests anthropologists should reconceptualise hacking as 'a model for ethnographic engagement in complex, emergent processes that are amenable to perception only through their traces in data' (Knox, 2021, 108). In her article on the datafication of home heating in the north of England, Knox argues that due to the black box of platform cultures and the inscrutable materiality of the data that underpins digital outputs, hacking may present a new methodology for anthropologists to engage with platform politics and performance. Moreover, the ethnographer's ability to hack is not only an opportunity for data to analysed or deconstructed anthropologically, but their findings in an environment build on opacity can 'become a frame for action' (Knox, 2021, 111).

I detect an activist call in Knox's reconceptualization of what 'the hack' could mean for anthropology's relationship with big data. In response to this, I introduced an activist, bottom-up element into my datafied methodologies by asking Sri Lankan information influencers to interrogate

the data visualisations I produced using big data extracted from Twitter on salient protest hashtags such as #Aragalaya. By co-producing knowledge together, my findings produce a new epistemological perspective on the big data that Twitter relies on for commercial aims, content moderation, surveillance and other opaque processes. The methodological innovation of augmented ethnography leads me to argue towards a decolonial pursuit of data entanglements because local Sri Lankan information influencer interpretation of data deconstructs the entrenched 'aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy' that data traditionally maintains (boyd and Crawford, 2012. 663). By deconstructing Twitter into subjective and emergent 'data realities' (Knox, 2021, 108) of my Sri Lankan participants, a potential roadmap for how anthropologists can develop decolonial processes to social media is laid out

The chapter is structured into five sections. The first section is an ethnographic description of me co-producing knowledge on data visualisations with a highly active Sri Lankan social media activist to construct alternative data realities. The second section sheds light on the prevalence of hacking and surveillance in Sri Lanka with two ethnographic cases; one mischievous and seemingly harmless, the other scandalous and egregious. The third section discusses the shortcomings of how influencer culture has been approached in scholarship and how these shortcomings are addressed with my conceptual and methodological approach. The fourth section introduces hacking as a critical element in the digital capital process, both as means of accumulation and a model for research. Finally, I consider how a datafied approach to digital capital can potentially offer a decolonising approach to how influencers and social media are visualised and theorized going forward.

4.2 | Visualising digital capital

The anthropology of digital data worlds is a relatively new area of research and in the spirit of starting afresh, I wish not to regurgitate the classic ethnographic trope of beginning the discussion with the description of an event, or biography, or a story, per se, but, rather, I will present three data visualisations. Continuing the departure from the norm, unlike previous research on the anthropology of data (Douglas-Jones, Walford, & Seaver, 2021), somewhat unconventionally, these data visualisations are not an external cultural phenomenon in the sense that they were out in the world, waiting for a (digital) anthropologist like you or me, to go and investigate. Indeed, what is perhaps interesting and new about my approach is that this cultural artefact was produced by me, to perform the function of a research prosthesis, allowing me to engage my research participants in Sri Lanka from a novel epistemological perspective.

February 2023: The first visualisation (Fig. 8) I present to Lahiru offers a kaleidoscope of colours on a jet-black background. From my quixotic perspective, the temptation to compare the visuals to the Milky Way—of bright stars, colourful planets and orbiting moons—is inescapable, but Lahiru is less interested in the aesthetics of the piece. Lahiru is a highly visible and influential Twitter user with close to 40,000 followers and he was one of the most prominent activists during last year's Aragalaya protests that ousted the incumbent President Gotabaya and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. We are seated at a table, under a fan at the United Socialist Party headquarters, where Lahiru, as a party member, operates from a couple of times a week. I explain to him that the data visualised is every interaction that happened under the hashtag '#Aragalaya' between the time phrase of 21st March – 31st July 2022, the

precise period of active occupation of Galle Face Green in downtown Colombo.

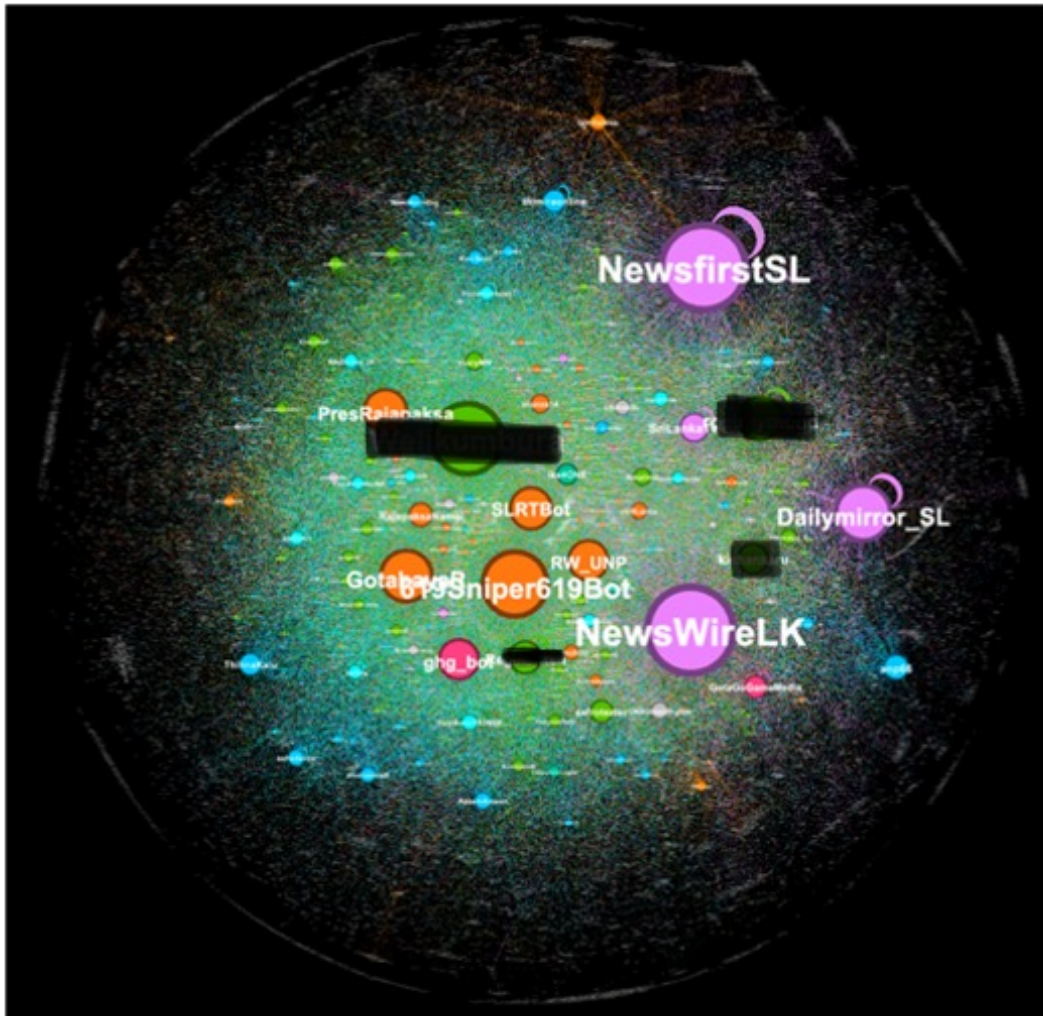


Figure 8: Data Visualisation of all users' interactions under the hashtag #Aragalaya. On face value, the pink nodes appear to be the mainstream media (i.e. NewsWireLK, DailymirrorSL) and the orange nodes are Sri Lankan government (PresRajapaksa, RW_UNP, GotabayaR). The green nodes are the information influencers of my study. I have removed the names of these users to protect their identity.

A common output of digital methods for the study of social media is the use of data visualisations both as heuristic tools to get an initial overview of relational datasets and to offer diagrammatic findings of the networks analysed. When working with large scale data-networks, for example, extracted via a specific Twitter hashtag, analysts work under the

expectation that the node on a graph—that is an individual user— is (1) positioned according to their connectivity to other nodes (users); (2) sized proportionally to their importance; and (3) colour-coded to a specific community (see Venturini et al., 2015). The result of this is a visually revealing representation of large, granular datasets, allowing for broad stroke inferences about how users are connected, how regularly they interact and through what kinds of content.

As both an enthusiast of politics and social media, unsurprisingly, Lahiru is heavily invested in the graphics I have made, leaning into my laptop screen, commentating on who's who in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere and explaining why different users may be connected. He points to the prominent group coloured green on the graph and names them 'the anti-Rajapaksa gang'. Despite seeing his own name among the cohort, he says, 'not everyone here is revolutionary, as some are more affiliated to capitalist or reformist parties'. He then adds that the Aragalaya began as a cross-class-and-age movement, but because of the JVP's growing influence in the protestors' demands, and their long history of extreme Marxist politics, many of the middle-class and older folk had lost interest and moved toward more centre, safer politics. Without me asking a question, Lahiru was providing a narrative history of not just what the data visualisation supposedly represented in the fixed time-period, but what had ensued in the aftermath of the Aragalaya with the installation of Ranil Wickremesinghe to the presidency.

The second visualisation (Fig. 9) that I show Lahiru is a 'filtered' view of the original graphic so only the orange 'community cluster' are visible. Very clearly, this community is made up of some of the most important political operators in Sri Lanka, including the incumbent president at the time of our conversation, known locally as simply 'Ranil', and the several of the Rajapaksas, including the rising political star, 'Namal'. The other two most

conspicuous nodes on the visualisation were two prominent bots called 619Sniper619 and SLRTBot. The data suggests that these two bot accounts were the most active nodes in the entire Twittersphere under the #Aragalaya hashtag, and, as the visualisation displays, they are closely aligned to this cohort of elite politicians. Despite my excitement about this revelation, Lahiru was unmoved, explaining that he would expect this kind of activity, that bots are everywhere, and the Rajapaksas rely on them to amplify their message and curtail dissent. To make his point, he spins out his phone, makes a couple of requests in his operating system, and shows me the man who, he says, is behind the bots. In fact, he shows me the man's LinkedIn profile to demonstrate the software engineer credibility, skilled as he is in various coding languages and programs.

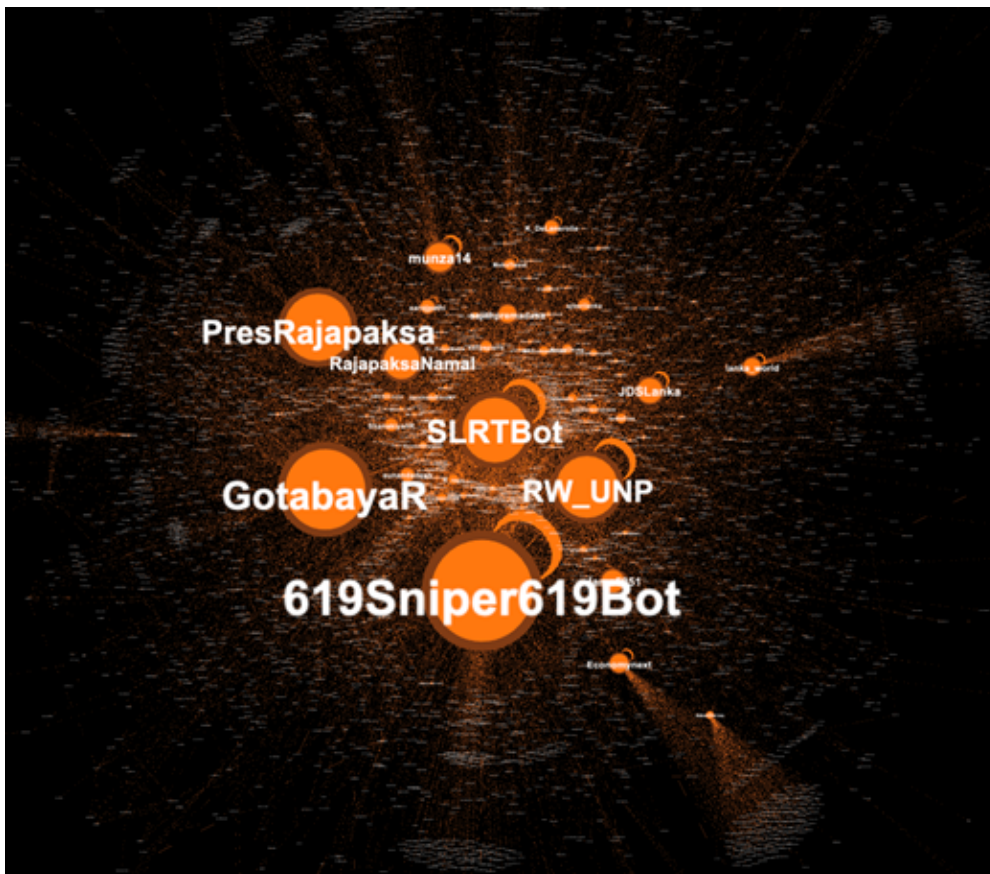


Figure 9: Filtered VNA to display most influential users in the 'Political Elite' community cluster. The VNA suggests Ex-President 'PresRajapaksa', ex-Prime

Minister 'GotabayaR' and current President 'RW_UNP' (Ranil Wickremesinghe) are connected to several highly active bots ('619Sniper619Bot' and 'SLRTBot').

The final visualisation (Fig. 10) is another filtered view so we can only see the cluster populated by hundreds of profiles with the word 'Anon' in the username. Having reviewed a small sample of the community's profiles I noted that the majority had Anonymous' infamous 'Guy Fawkes' mask in their profile picture and/or had references to hacking or freedom in their bios. My initial inference was that this was evidence that the international hacker network, Anonymous, were somehow involved in the Sri Lankan protests that took down the government in summer 2022. To put it mildly, I was delighted about this major new finding, and I was keen to hear Lahiru's take. Again, however, he was less effervescent. This was another example of the government and their supporters being up to their 'old tricks'. The 'Anonymous' accounts were all bots, designed and deployed to 'doss the Aragalaya hashtag'. DDoSing is a popular hacker method of overwhelming a digital artefact with interference to destabilise its functionality. DDoSing a website, for example, may entail thousands of accounts trying to access the website at the same time, so the website cannot manage the deluge of traffic, forcing it to crash. Not dissimilarly, DDoSing the Aragalaya hashtag meant thousands of bots interacting with the hashtag with arbitrary nonsense or false information to discredit its usefulness as a site of protest. But why Anonymous? Why make the bots look like the world's most feared and revered international hacker network? Put simply, Lahiru said, 'to fuck with us'.

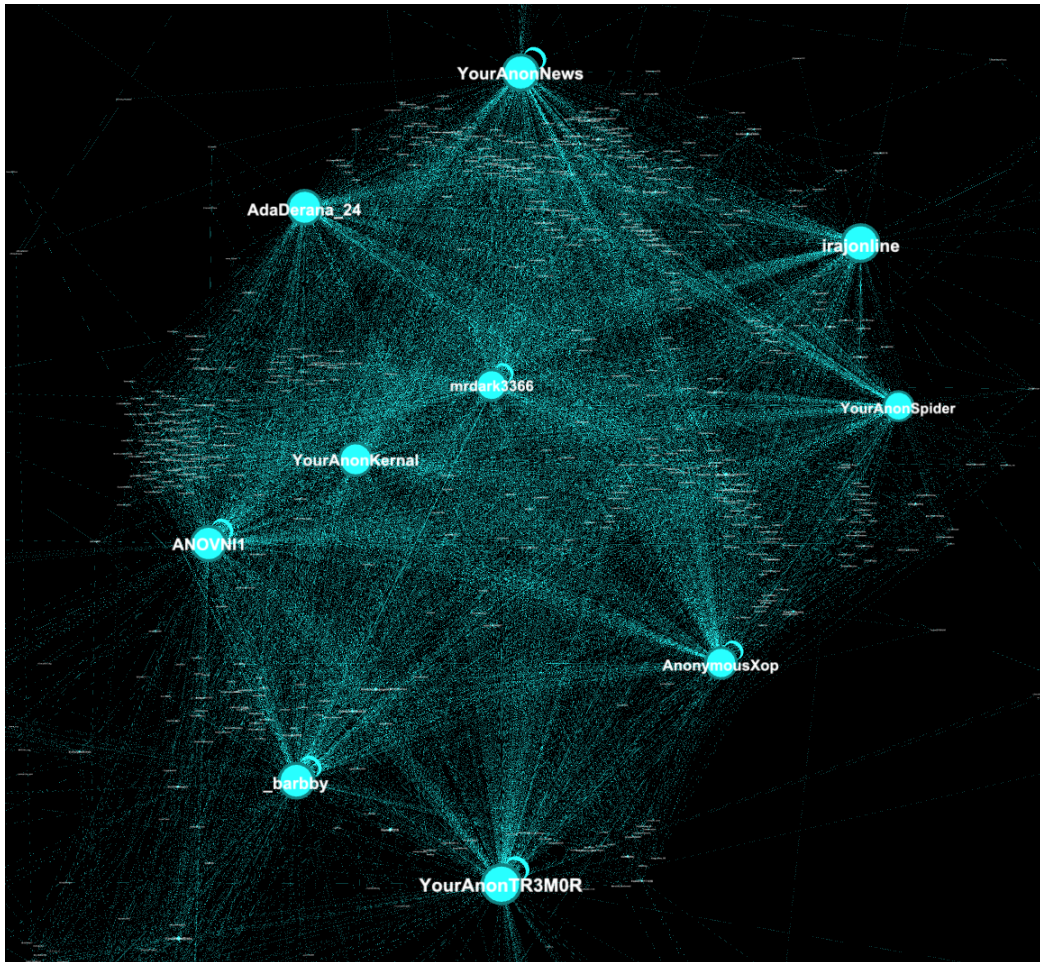


Figure 10: Filtered VNA to the community cluster identified as the international hacker network, 'Anonymous'. Co-production of knowledge with local information influencers suggests these accounts are fake and operational on the behalf of the 'Political Elite'.

Lahiru was the ideal candidate to co-produce knowledge of the data visualisations with. Positioned as he is towards the apex of social media citizen activism in Sri Lanka, and with a professional career that traverses politics and social media management for a variety of individuals and organisations, his knowledge of the Twittersphere is in-depth and profoundly intimate, as he routinely displayed in our discussions by qualifying outlandish statements about fellow users with instant evidence from their profiles and feeds. Referring to a fellow user, Lahiru remarked, 'x seemed cool, they were talking about oppression and human rights during the Aragalaya, but when Ranil (the current president) came to power

and started abusing us once more, they shut up', and he would swiftly show me their profile to illustrate their sudden shift from anti-government rhetoric to not talking about politics at all. Since the Aragalaya, Lahiru's status as an information influencer has grown considerably. Not only did his Twitter followership grow by over ten thousand during the four-month occupation of Galle Face Green in downtown Colombo, but as a leading representative for his political party, the USP, he had subsequently been on a four-week trip to the UK to speak at numerous universities about his experience of the Aragalaya.

Lahiru was one of five information influencers that I interviewed using data visualisations as a research prosthesis in an attempt to gather a different perspective on social media influence, the meaning of data, and the general state of social media activism in Sri Lanka. Drawing on these numerous points of view, far from displaying a fixed version of reality, the data visualisations were met with vivid and distinctly different interpretations and experiences, or what Hannah Knox calls, 'data realities' (Knox, 2021). As Knox writes in her description of how residents in the north of England interact with the smart meter devices installed in their homes to regulate heating, 'Data here was not simply descriptive or informational... but rather became actively constitutive of an experience of living in an environment characterized by complex, extensive, and often unknowable relations' (2021, 114).

When I asked Lahiru, what should we do with these data visualisations, he said, without any doubt, that we should share them on Twitter. His rationale was that he and his comrades had always suspected the government employed bots to derail their campaigns, but 'Now', he exclaimed, 'we have proof!'. This was in stark contrast to two other information influencers who scolded me for suggesting sharing the data visualisations on social media. They said these graphics are incriminating

and potentially dangerous. One said he believes the government has been trained in this kind of data modelling and will know how to interpret them and therefore know how to identify particularly influential Twitter users. The conflicting data realities, first of Lahiru's reality of truth, or 'proof', versus opposing data realities of fear and surveillance, speaks to the manifold ways data is not unequivocal or stable, but demonstrably ambiguous, subjective and emergent.

4.3 | Hacking digital capital

To move beyond a narrow conception of my research participants' interpretation of the data visualisations and their 'data reality', in this next section, I present ethnographic examples that emphasize and substantiate the revelations made by the graphs: that ubiquitous government bots and nefarious actors are highly active in discrediting protest networks. The ethnographic description delves into the prevalence of hacking and surveillance on social media in Sri Lanka and how this affects notions of trust, online de-platforming, and real-world reputation damage. Indeed, what is perhaps most arresting about these accounts is how relaxed and candid my research participant was about circumstances so intense and horrible, demonstrating the persuasives of hacking and associated practices to the lives of activists in Sri Lanka.

January 2023: Bosco updates his Facebook status, 'Folks, my insta has been hacked!' and finishes the exclamation with a flurry of conflicting emojis: 👍 thumbs up, 😱 shock-face, 😭 cry-face, 🤣 LMAO (laugh my ass-off) face. I consider becoming one of the many friends or followers who post a comment beneath Bosco's news expressing solidarity, making light, or sending best wishes, but I reason that my message will only get lost in

the ocean of comments, so decide to directly message him via Facebook's Messenger service. In hyper-colloquial terms, I express grievance to hear he has had his Instagram account compromised (see full exchange in Figure 11), but, rather, bizarrely, he writes back instantly and denies the hack. I'm confused and say I hope he's ok and ask him how he's feeling about the invasion of his preferred platform for activism...

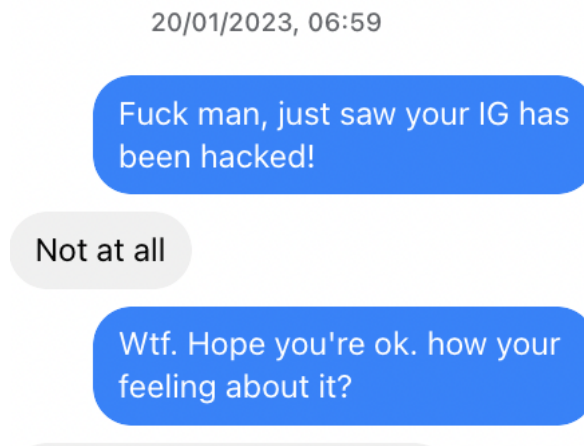


Figure 11. Bosco and I's Messenger conversation: he denies his Instagram being hacked

As I introduced in *Chapter 3*, Bosco is one of the leading protesters of the Aragalaya protests last year who has acquired a considerable following on Instagram of over 12,000 followers thanks to his vitriolic, emotional and sometimes hilarious anti-government video-rants. Given Instagram is the platform he deploys principally for political participation, and where he has had the most explicit success, having his Instagram hacked is a serious invasion of his own privacy, and the privacy of his friends and followers who the hacker may be also able to communicate with. The purpose of the hack is to derail control, and erode trust between producer and consumer, speaker and audience. Bosco replies to my question about how he is feeling about the hack with some gibberish about bitcoin mining being '100% real and legitimate', and knowing his penchant for making fun of everything, especially himself, I just text-laugh back (see Figure 12).

Following this, there is an exchange of genuine ambiguity when both he and I make no sense to each other. He writes, 'Honestly', underpinning his seemingly irrelevant point about the world's most famous cryptocurrency being a credible alternative to fiat currency, and I simply write 'stop it' as I am (almost) certain he's only gassing with me. His reply 'WDYM', a text-speak acronym, which, when capitalised, means in no uncertain terms, WHAT DO YOU MEAN? is a conspicuous expression of frustration and confusion. In my head, I was thinking *what the hell is wrong with him*, and I am sure he was thinking the same about me.

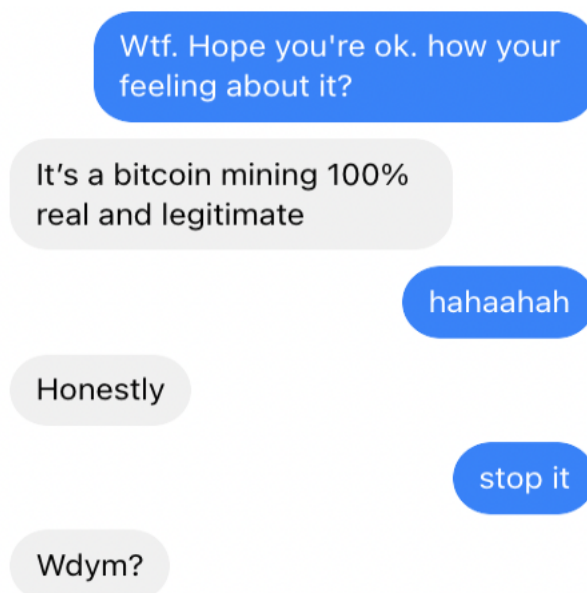


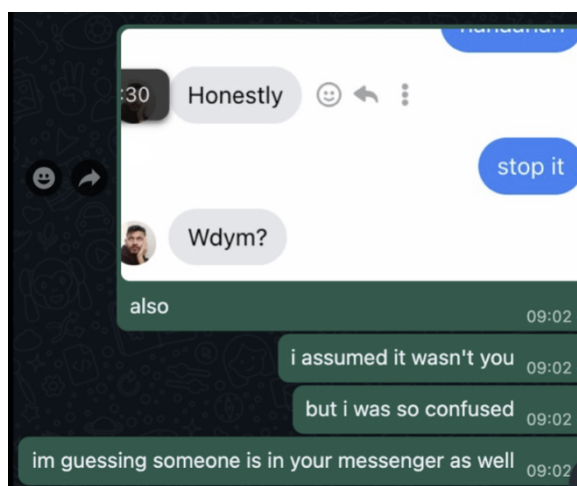
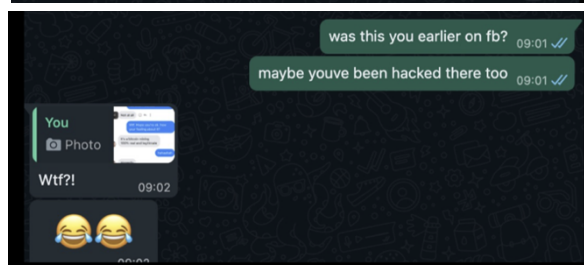
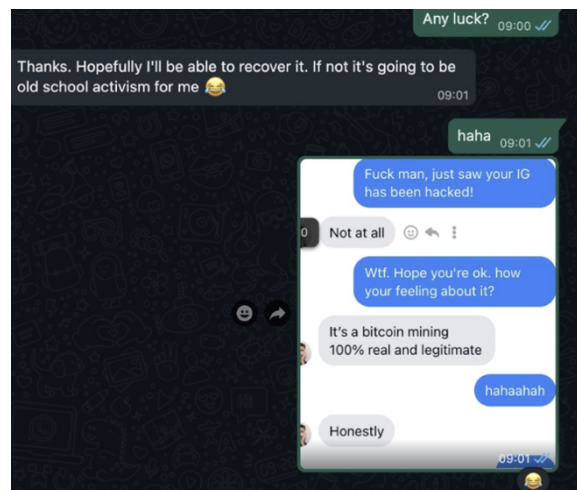
Figure 12. Bosco and I not making sense

Baffled but not perturbed I opt to message Bosco on WhatsApp. To avoid confusion, I would like to reiterate what has happened so far: Bosco has had his Instagram account hacked and he has broadcast the news on Facebook, following which I had directly messaged him asking if he as ok. Now, due to the unusual exchange I decide to message him on a different direct messaging tool, WhatsApp, because I have a strong suspicion that his Facebook/Messenger account has also been hacked, although he is

unaware. Digital Anthropologists Miller and Madianou (2013) made the convincingly argument that digital communication systems seldom exist in isolation but form an assemblage of tools individuals opt to use to meet the perceived moral context of their communication needs. For example, my sudden shift to WhatsApp signifies my belief that the encrypted peer-to-peer messaging service elicits a more immediate and personal message and is thus appropriate given the circumstances. In addition, it is perhaps interesting to note that all four applications in concurrent use and conversation at this point (Instagram, Facebook, Messenger and WhatsApp) are all proprietary software operated under the Meta corporation, owned by Mark Zuckerberg.

Again, but on a different tool, WhatsApp, I ask Bosco if he's ok and if he can resolve his hacked Instagram account. He doesn't acknowledge the conversation we were having only seconds before on Messenger, but replies saying he has hope, otherwise it will be 'old school activism' for him (see Figure 13). As is customary with Bosco's communications, he adds a laugh emoji 😂, because, as he tells me later in person, 'what can you do if you can't laugh at this BS'. As I suspect he has been hacked on his Facebook/Messenger accounts too, I screenshot the conversation we were having there and ask him if it was him texting, gently suggesting that I think he's been hacked there too. As we exchange messages, we both realise what has happening: there was someone 'else' in his Messenger account pretending to him and interacting with me. One the strangest elements of the hack was that as Bosco could see the messages, I was sending him but not the messages the hacker was texting me. So, when he asked me, exacerbated, 'WDYM?', he was responding to a list of random messages from me: text laughing, telling him to 'stop it', et al. We agree that he should update his Facebook status to announce he has been hacked there too, and then he should log out of these applications, change his passwords, and wait some time to log in again. Whilst I must confess,

at the time, I was more exhilarated than flustered about being involved in a live hacking, Bosco was relaxed throughout and afterwards. This kind of duplicitous activity, potentially damaging and criminal, was largely unremarkable for an activist in Sri Lanka fighting an oppressive political environment renowned for its heavy-handed to dissidents.



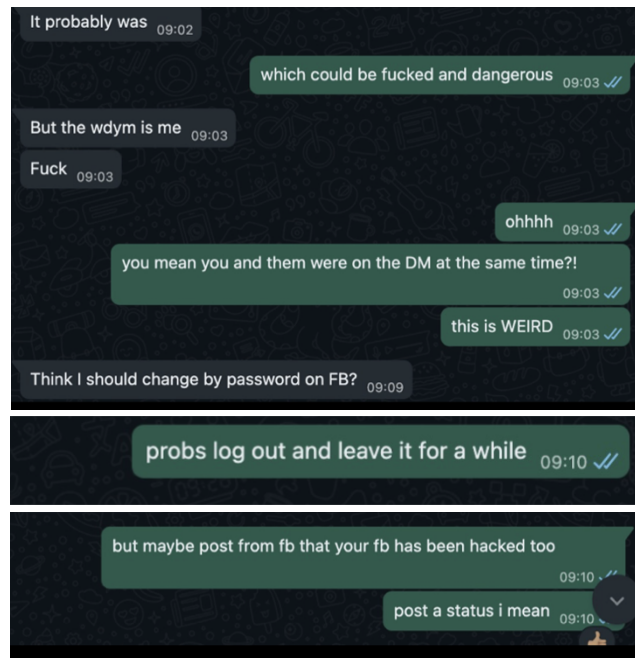


Figure 13. Bosco and I realising that the hacker was inside his Messenger communicating with me

Most if not all the Sri Lankan information influencers I collaborated it had been victim to some sort of hacking on their social media profiles. The dynamics of the hack vary greatly, from seemingly vague attempts to dupe users into unusual behaviours or beguiling conversations such as the exchange between Bosco and myself, to hyper-aggressive attacks on the personhood of an individuals that result in shocking social outcomes IRL and deplatforming on social media. It is to an ethnographic account of one of these egregious attacks I now turn.

November 2022: Due to the highly sensitive nature of what follows I am consciously providing limited contextual detail to the narrative to thoroughly protect the anonymity of the people involved. Upon arriving in Sri Lanka and announcing on Twitter my plans to conduct ethnography amongst social media activists and influencers, Faz, a fellow Twitter user who I had never interacted with before, welcomed me and said he'd be interested to speak to a 'digital ethnographer'. He completed his message

with the beer's emoji, appearing to confirm my hypothesis that Twitter is an advantageous research tool by enabling me to meet people organically. On the surface, Faz looked a strong candidate for my research given he had approximately 20,000 Twitter followers, but following a more thorough review of his posts and content, he was seemingly somewhat apolitical and therefore not someone I was typically interested in. However, I was happy to subscribe to the open-endedness of ethnography and its useful habit of enabling the ethnographer to meet those outside of one's standardised research protocol to reveal people and topics of emerging interest. Moreover, due to his enthusiasm to speak to me, I suspected Faz would be interested to help make sense of my data visualisations.

Following a flurry of direct messages, whereby I sent him my website with a detailed description of my research interests and access to sign a digital consent form, some days later we had arranged to meet at his office. I had told Faz in advance that I wanted to show him some data visualisations, but when I arrived, he wanted to talk about cyber security. The reason, I discovered, why Faz's recent Twitter content was seemingly apolitical was because of the aggressive hacking he had suffered and the terrifying surveillance he was enduring. Only three weeks before, Faz had woken up to his Facebook and Instagram being inaccessible and an automated message saying he had been banned from Meta platforms for life. Child pornography had been shared from his personal accounts and the logical punishment administered from the platforms' automated content moderation system is a strict and instant ban from all Meta platforms and services. Whilst explaining the hacking, Faz typed 'faceb' into the browser and turned his screen to me. Rather than being able to see his newsfeed or profile page as any ordinary user would, we saw a heavily pixelated page with a message confirming the ban. He started to describe what was under the pixels and as soon as I realised these were the illicit images I cried 'STOP!!' and covered my eyes.

Notwithstanding the shock of the experience, I was deeply intrigued about what happened to Faz and what this implied about the state of social media in Sri Lanka. Faz was a highly respectable member of society—in business and in public life—and yet he was victim to some form of unspeakable social media take down. Much like Bosco, although this kind of hacking was clearly much more serious, Faz, surprisingly, did not appear to be upset about the ordeal. He explained that due to Meta's AI content moderation system instantly detecting the illegal content and thereby immediately removing the content from his page, his friends, family and people in his wider social network had not seen the child pornography, therefore he had not suffered any reputation damage, per se. In addition, due to his connections in high places, he was (fairly) confident he could get his Facebook and Instagram accounts back soon. Faz did also concede, however, that if he was not in this privileged position, and was like any ordinary social media user, he would be de-platformed from the world's most popular social media platform for life.

Inexplicably, this was not the end of Faz's torment. In the same calm way that he explained the child pornography hacking, Faz reached for his mobile phone. This time, I was more prepared and sat away from the screen; he intuitively understood and said, 'No, this is different'. On the screen was recorded video footage from the security cameras he had set up outside his family home. At first, I was unsure of what I was looking at exactly, but I exclaimed when I saw a white van parked outside his home, with a man peering out of the passenger window, taking photographs with a long-lens camera. This was deeply serious, and I looked incredulous at Faz. Sri Lanka has a long and horrible history of the state using white vans to disappear journalists and dissidents through the civil war. And, again, he seemed calm, even smiling as he showed me. The only conclusion I can draw is that these horrendous acts of terror are so entrenched into the

fabric of Sri Lankan modern history, that people, even victims, are desensitised to the horror of living under such frightening, egregious measures.

As should become clear through these evocative ethnographic descriptions, my focus is not on data visualisations, per se, but the people whose practices are historicised by the data visualisations and the stories they provoke. The first ethnographic description above with Lahiru is in place to illustrate that all is not what it seems on social media in Sri Lanka. Echoing previous computational research on Twitter about the prevalence of bots and other deceptive actors, in this case, it appears bots operate to amplify pro-government rhetoric and to spoil the Aragalaya hashtag as a site of meaningful protest. The second narrative piece signals the recurrence of hacking as Bosco's multiple, simultaneous account hacks reflect the pervasiveness and mundanity of hacking on social media. The third ethnographic description with Faz demonstrates the terrifying lengths nefarious actors go to scare off and deplatform influential social media users who have ties to progressive politics and activism, and how, being influential on social media can lead to hostile surveillance both online and IRL.

The argument I am building is about the intrinsic value of digital capital, and how this value appears to mobilise volatile agents who operate to discredit information influencers in the battleground for digital capital accumulation. My growing perspective is, if digital capital did not offer the potential to threaten the status quo, then bad actors would not operate to spoil influencer sites of protest such as the Aragalaya hashtags or influencer accounts where digital capital is accumulated and exchanged.

4.4 | Hacking the hackers. Who are Anonymous?

It is time to ask a series of pertinent questions. Firstly, what is this nebulous phenomenon of hacking? Secondly, who are Anonymous and what are they doing in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere? And finally, what are the implications of Lahiru's claim that these Anonymous accounts are merely bots imitating the world's most famous hacker network?

According to anthropologist Gabriella Coleman who has spent years ethnographically researching hackers, both on the fringes of the internet and IRL at hacker meetups and conferences, 'in its most basic form, hacking is a social phenomenon that is intimately connected to computers and composed of different types of technologists who self-identify as hackers (Coleman & Jandric, 2019, para 4). In its initial formation, at the heart of hacking was a desire to resist traditional power structures or rupture the status quo, but what constitutes a hack has seemed to have increasingly diversified away from resistance and computers, as exemplified by the distinctly non-computation and very criminal, 'UK phone hacking scandal'. Diverging further from the computer model, media scholar, McKenzie Wark (2004), claimed in their book, *Hacker Manifesto*, that the ability to mutate, change, and remix ideas from existing cultural material also equates to hacking, reimagining hacking into all manner of social phenomenon, from climate justice to community health. Despite divergent hacker cultures, and transgender advocates such as Wark, hackers have been routinely portrayed with a strong masculine identity. Indeed, 'one prevalent way of framing the hacker has been by casting him as the male hero-technologist who conquers the electronic frontier', (Coleman & Jandric, 2019, para 14), situating hackers as

colonists motivated by terra nova domination and resource extraction for capital accumulation. The similarities between the early colonialists of the Americas, Christopher Columbus and Pizarro Gonzalez, and the two titans of contemporary platform culture, Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg and the world's rich man and owner of Twitter, Elon Musk, can appear striking say Coleman & Jandric (2019). Considering Mark Zuckerberg's recent commitment to building the Metaverse and Elon Musk's obsession with interplanetary space exploration, it is hard to disagree that there seems to be an implicit connection between historical colonists domination of distant lands for the extraction resources and the 'move fast and break things' mindset of Silicon Valley that see all spaces and all people as a data point to be exploited.

The international hacker network Anonymous have achieved worldwide infamy thanks to their radical politics and the part they have played in numerous high-profile political movements against what they perceive to be authoritarian orders, perhaps, most famously during Occupy Wall Street; a 2011, leftwing movement in New York's financial district protesting corporate corruption and economic inequality. As the name suggests, the people behind Anonymous are unknown, and as a digitally enabled network, they are leaderless, amorphous and have no centralised headquarters. The mass media had been immortalising the enigmatic hacker group since their 2008 campaign against the Church of Scientology when hundreds of protesters descended onto the streets of New York, London and Sydney wearing Guy Fawkes masks, black suits and holding signs saying, 'We Are the Internet' (Coleman, 2014, page). First worn by the antihero of Alan Moore's dystopian graphic novel V for Vendetta and later popularised by the Hollywood movie of the same name, Anonymous' adoption of the mask of the seventeenth century Catholic who plotted to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London have become iconic, granting the hacker network mystery and charisma. The mask's devious grin has a

Janus face-quality, simultaneously depicting a dual meaning of mischief and fun, whilst also being serious, defiant, and confrontational; many of the qualities that their activism entails.

In 2011, Anonymous became central and explicit operators in the unfolding Arab Spring, multiple anti-government protest movements across the MENA region, culminating with the ousting of Tunisian President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011 (Breuer, 2012), the overthrow of incumbent President Mubarak in Egypt on 11 February 2011 (Iskander, 2012) and extending into numerous neighbouring countries including Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Anonymous entered the fray by hacking the Tunisian government's cyberspace, releasing a series of letters to journalists to explain their rationale and strategic technological approach. In the first press release, they wrote:

‘In a show of blatant disregard for the guaranteed right of free speech, over the past 24 hours, Tunisian government officials have hacked email and Facebook accounts... Anonymous, in turn, has launched DDoS attacks against the websites of the Tunisian prime minister and his corrupt government, the stock market, and the primary DNS server of Tunisia—thus successfully bringing down many of the websites ending in .tn. Additionally, we have taken steps to ensure that Tunisians can connect anonymously to the internet, and access information that their government does not want them to see.’ Excerpt from an Anonymous Letter to Journalists 15 January 2011 (Coleman, 2014, 264-5)

Anonymous' origins lie in the online message board forum, 4chan, a dark corner of the internet notorious for anti-establishment trolling, political

vitriol and an anything goes rhetoric. The Tunisian government was targeted by Anonymous because of the regime's indifference to media freedoms; an offence to the hacker network's libertarian principles. Despite several press releases in the same explicit tone as the above, Anonymous are absent throughout most of the dedicated literature on the Arab Spring, but anthropologist Gabriella Coleman's was conducting digital ethnography with the faceless hacker network at the time of the uprisings and she has chartered their involvement in her book, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (Coleman, 2014). Coleman says Anonymous' historical omission from most of the coverage on the Arab Spring is curious because the hacker group made explicit calls to journalists. Evidently, the popular hubbub around the Arab Spring being a 'Twitter Revolution' took all the headlines, whilst also marginalising various other structural factors that contributed to the intensity of the protests: rising inflation, mass unemployment, gross corruption et al.

As an ethnographer using data visualisations as a research probe, enabling me to map the Aragalaya protests as they happened whilst travel to Sri Lanka was unpermitted due to pandemic restrictions, when I first identified Anonymous on the data visualisations, I thought I may have made a historical revelation of great import. Anonymous had not previously made any (known) furores into Sri Lankan politics and the finding could potentially situate the 2022's Aragalaya protests in the same era-defining interventions of Arab Spring. As I have described in *Chapter 2* and Sri Lanka's difficult relationship with media freedoms and 'truth' following decades of state-sponsored violence against journalists and dissidents, the Aragalaya was already showing signs of emulating some of the key protocols of the Arab Spring thanks to the influential role of social media in the orchestration of protests and the ousting of long-withstanding, despotic strongmen. The discovery of the international

hacker network Anonymous's 'involvement' in the Aragalaya via the data visualisations, therefore, appeared to present another, profound link between the Sri Lankan protests and the Arab Spring.

However, given the highly volatile political landscape in Sri Lanka and the propensity for Twitter to enable fake accounts, mobilise misleading information and to misrepresent a facsimile of reality (Howard & Woolley, 2016; Howard, Woolley & Caloc, 2018), notions of an analogous hacker activity during the Aragalaya protests in Sri Lanka was rounded squashed by the information influencers' interpretation of their localised Twittersphere. Several of my research participants (including Hiri, Faz and Siri) suspected that the accounts with Anonymous-esque user accounts were bots and/or controlled by the Sri Lanka government. When I asked Lahiru, Why would the Sri Lankan 'Political Elite' be creating fake accounts to imitate the hacker network, Anonymous, infamous for their libertarian rhetoric, and anti-regime politics? His answer was blunt and unambiguous: the government or some other nefarious agents did this to 'fuck' with the protest's integrity. While I cannot be sure if Lahiru is correct, in a social media ecosystem that is shown to be populated with duplicitous actors, including several highly active bots, I argue that this ethnographic exercise demonstrates how mistrust is embedded into how social media users interact with platforms, and how digital capital, the datafied representation of social media influence, is far from stable and reliable.

Let me be clear: the data visualisations do appear to illustrate some stable inferences about the nature of digital capital when corroborated with additional research. For example, the ex-president of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the incumbent, Ranil Wickremesinghe, are both clearly visible as two of the largest nodes on the data visualisations around the Aragalaya hashtag (refer to diagram 2 and the filtered view of the political elite cluster). Manual content analysis of the two politicians shows that

they are highly influential social media operators, with over 500,000 and 300,000 followers, respectively, and their colossal following reflects their status IRL: an elite political class of powerful Sinhalese men, highly educated and from extraordinarily wealthy backgrounds. I would suggest this further confirms my reconceptualization of digital capital as being a firm reproduction of an individual's economic and symbolic capital, not a reflection of one's 'digital competences' as Ragnedda has initially suggested. However, the data visualisations also identify several highly active bots amplifying the political elites content therefore putting into question the process of how influence on social media is mobilised on social media and how we as scholars should interpret it. More than that, content analysis of the Anonymous accounts identified by the data visualisation and proclaimed by Lahiru to be bots deployed by nefarious actors to prop up the political elite and undermine the clarity and mission of the Aragalaya, emerge as a mash-up of discontinued, suspended and active accounts. As Figure 14 shows, I cannot access several of the accounts of the so-called Anonymous profiles. Furthermore, I cannot confirm if the removal of these accounts is Twitter deliberating deplatforming bots due to activity that breeches the platforms' best practice terms and conditions, or if the bot-operators expired them. In a media sphere built on mistrust and mis/disinformation, failing to make succinct conclusions about what is real and what happens on Twitter, seems entirely expected.

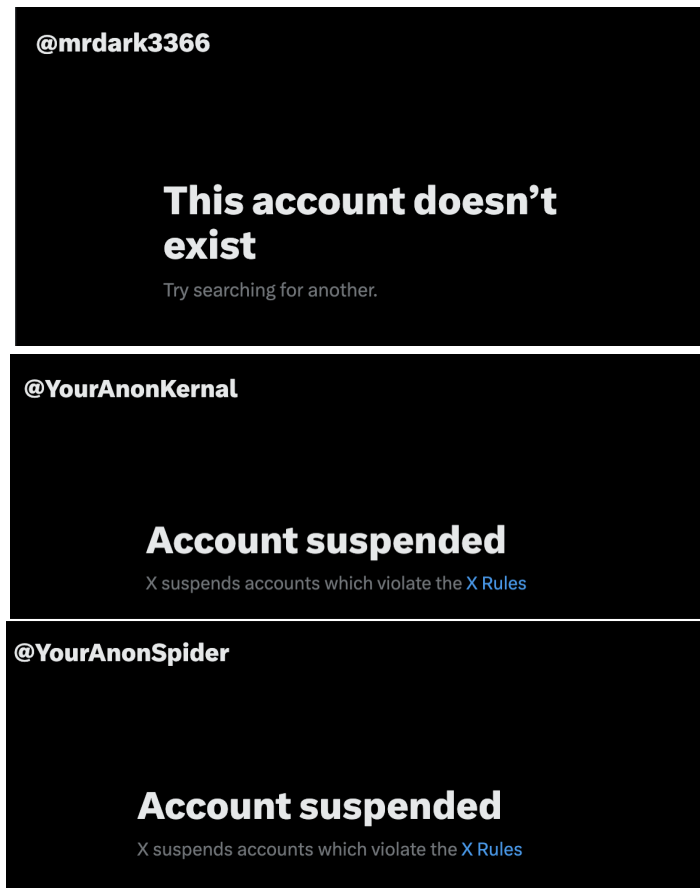


Figure 14: Several of the largest nodes in the Anonymous cluster have either been suspended by Twitter or say that the account does not exist.

To add further ambiguity to the piece, the largest node in the Anonymous cluster (see again Figure 10) is in fact the official page of the global hacker network, Anonymous. The Twitter account named @YourAnonNews is visualised as the node at the apex of Figure 10 and has an extraordinary accumulation of digital capital with 7.6 million followers (see Figure 15). This revelation suggests Anonymous was active and conserving around the Aragalaya hashtag during the 2022 protests in Sri Lanka; a datafied reality that is in direct contradiction to Lahiru's judgement that the Anonymous accounts identified via the data visualisations were fake and set up to discredit the Aragalaya.

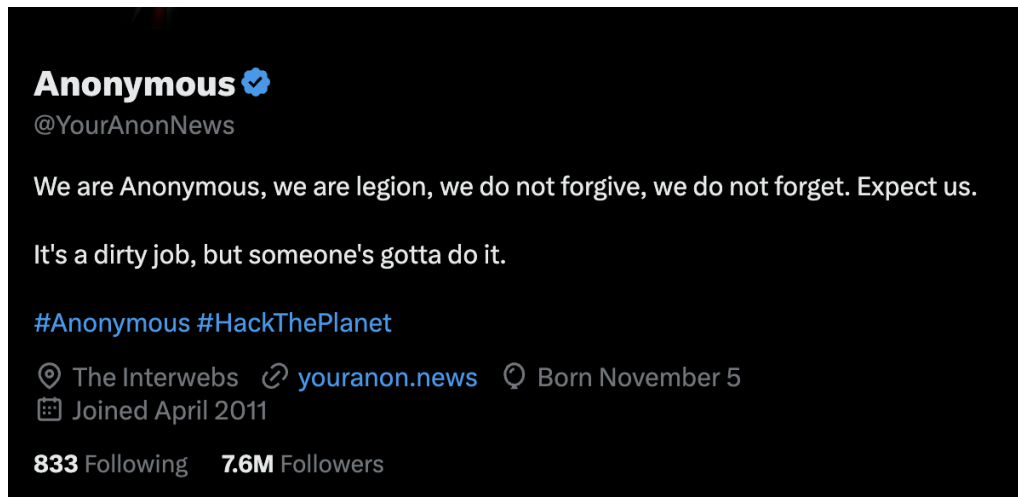


Figure 15: The largest node in the Anonymous cluster (see fig 3 above) is in fact the official Anonymous Twitter account suggesting Anonymous were active somehow in the promotion of the Aragalaya hashtag.

This lack of clarity about who was influencing and sharing content around the Aragalaya hashtag does not only muddy the epistemological fog but constructs the foundations of my argument because the integrity of big data as reliable source of knowledge is put into question. Hannah Knox calls the manifold ways that data materialises in the lives of users, 'data realities', highlighting the emergent and highly subjective way people interpret data. If I had visualised the data in one of the many universities of northern Europe where this typology of computational methods are being honed (such as the University of Helsinki, Amsterdam or Milan), and forwent any ethnographic engagement, then I would be potentially writing a thesis chapter (and perhaps even news headlines!) about how the international hacker network Anonymous had a pivotal role in the Sri Lanka protests of 2022, and how their clandestine involvement is analogous to the Arab Spring. Instead, here I am arguing against the concreteness of data and arguing for the recognition of multiple 'data realities' (Knox, 2021). The uncertainty around my empirical findings is a strength, as the innovative use of data visualisations in the ethnographic process demonstrates the frailty of data, and therefore goes on to question the legitimacy of social media's datafication as a heuristic when adopted on

face-value, without ethnographic corroboration. Moreover, this process supports my redefinition of digital capital that is more clearly defined against Bourdieu's original conception of symbolic capital because datafication emerges as the defining feature of digital capital.

4.5 | Developing a decolonial approach to data

We live in a digitally mediated world where data underwrites a process of knowledge production through complex aggregation of statistics from manifold sources and algorithmic formulas to decisively and unequivocally predict and inform all manner of digital-related outputs. These systems are known to be inherently bias and manifest actions, decisions and relations that serve the ends of their producers, very often in the service of venture capital and/or despotic regimes of power. Despite this understanding, the datafication of public life continues to proliferate, as data theorist, Paola Ricaurte, points out, 'dominant discourses predict a near future in which a deep learning revolution and big data will optimize the capabilities of machine learning (ML) to solve the most complex tasks and foster economic growth. To accomplish this, the quality, diversity, and amount of collected data need to increase'. (Ricaurte, 2019, 350-351) What is at stake from my ethnographic descriptions is therefore substantial and valuable. As I will go on to argue through the remaining of the chapter, my augmented ethnography of presenting Twitter data visualisations to some of the most active and influential civilians of the Sri Lanka Twittersphere has helped deconstruct dominant datafied epistemologies on the who and what is influential on social media. Part of this chapter's objective is to take on the challenge of potentially providing

a decolonialising perspective on digital data and call for more datafied approaches to anthropology.

For clarity, I shall define big data in all its complexity. We can understand data to be, 'facts about the world, and the people, place, things and phenomena that together comprise it, that we collect in order that they may be acted upon' (Greenfield, 2017, 210, italics in original). Conceptually distinct from knowledge because data is information that something happened, whilst knowledge is information why something happened, knowledge is abstract, while data is tangible: the later implies a 'recorded' entity that has been captured using a sensor and stored in a system (Greenfield, 2017, Srnicek, 2017). Because data may be acted upon it has latency as a tool and it is therefore non-objective (see Kranzberg, 1986), and while data may be labelled 'raw', this reflects the need for it to be refined, rather than hint towards any inherent neutrality. Since the advent of mass digitalisation, the prefix of 'big' has been added to data stored or collected by digitally mediated practices, although size is not the defining element of a digital dataset (boyd and Crawford, 2012). For example, a national census from the twentieth century collected using analogue methods and therefore predigital may outstrip the scale of the 'big data' collected from a Twitter hashtag, but the historic census will not be retrospectively refined as big data because, big data, as an informational phenomenon, is more profound than merely its scale. According to boyd and Crawford highly influential paper, big data is defined by the intersection of three elements: 1) digital technologies to gather and store it, 2) computational analytics to identify patterns and make critical inferences, and 3) a mythology to proliferate the commonplace understanding that very large data sets will offer insights previously unknowable, 'with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy' (ibid. 663).

Digital data has been further defined as something that cannot be removed from its objective purpose of the accumulation of profit and its historic relation to colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). According to decolonial scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, colonialising was built on a process of inclusion and exclusion or what he calls 'abyssal lines' (de Sousa Santos, 2007). The lives and cultures that fell outside of the acceptable modes of inclusion 'vanishes as reality becomes non-existent and is indeed produced as non-existent' (de Sousa Santos, 2007, 188). Since the post-colonial period in the mid twentieth century, the drawing of abyssal lines has not diminished, only it has become more opaque, and continues through a plethora of political instruments, namely science and technology. Getting to the heart of the matter, Mustafa Syed Ali (2016) take ups digital technology's intrinsic relationship with colonialism in a paper called A Brief History of Decolonial Computing. In it, he questions whether is it 'somewhat of a stretch to describe computing as 'colonial', especially since colonialism as a phenomenon tied up with imperial structures of domination and settlement is a thing of the past?' But drawing on the work of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) theorists, Paul Dourish and Scott Mainwaring (2012), Ali shows that the 'colonial impulse' is not a historical relic but continues to manifest in a pervasive rationalising process that has disregard for alterity and serves as point of reference for the totality of Western expansionism. For example, Sarah Blacker's ethnographic account shows how the datafied reports produced by the Canadian authorities on pollution in First Nation communities are colonialising. She writes, 'because government metrics of contamination are framed as objective and politically neutral, they are difficult to challenge, particularly for economically marginalised and racialised communities that are disproportionately affected by environmental contamination' (Blacker, 2021, 144).

Drawing inspiration from Anibal Quijano's often-cited article, *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America* (2000), the aim of Ali's paper is to instigate a decolonial turn in the way scholars approach science and technology studies. As a first of two steps in developing this process, Ali suggests researchers should reflect on their own 'geo-political and body-political orientation' (ibid. page) when theorising others' relationships with computing and its associated technologies. Referring to the statement on positionality in *Chapter 1*, I may consider myself to be the product of colonialism having a mixed British/Indian heritage, but the fact that English is my first language, and my position as a CIS gendered male, I should be aware I have inherited considerable privileges, especially in relationship to digital communications. In my final year of high school in 2002, I studied ICT (Information Communication Technologies) learning basic HTML coding language and building my first website for a coursework assignment. Moreover, I hazily recall that my first engagement with internet connectivity was around 1997, aged 13 or 14, in my Indian uncle's apartment in the UK. I can reflect that having such early exposure to digital communications, in the medium of internet relay chatrooms (chatting mostly about music) via large desktop computers, has allowed me to experience the evolution of digital communications before the advent of social media, granting me the opportunity to reflect on technological changes and their affordances through my own innate relationship with them. Moreover, my training in basic ICT helped me learn the Python code required to extract the Twitter data and the produce the visualisations. Thus, although I am cautiously proposing a decolonial methodological approach to data, I should remember that the terms of my engagement have been born and enforced by many of the processes that we are trying to disrupt. Nonetheless, I also observe that being born in the Global North does not mean an individual or a group cannot actively support or advance decolonial understanding. Following De Sousa Santos (2007, 2014), we can consider the notion of a Global South not a geographical space that

only comprises the people and land of certain regions, but a political imaginary that consists of people anywhere and everywhere fighting against the injustices of colonialism and resisting the encroachment of neo-capitalism. Or in other words, 'we can find countless Souths also in the Global North' (Milan and Trere, 2019, 325).

The second step Ali recommends for building a decolonial approach to digital studies involves an epistemological leap where we attempt to think about a digitalisation process that is built from the ground up, with those at the peripheries of global and local power regimes (the non-white, the female, the rural et al.) being implemented in the design of computing in order to envisage a digital ecosystem that disrupts, and resists entrenched colonial lines. While I agree with the call for a colonial turn in digital data studies, it is non-obvious how we go about this second step beyond mere semaphore. More recently, writing specifically on the phenomena of big data, scholars Milan and Trere (2019), not only question what would a decolonial theory of big data look like, they list six essential conditions that researchers should implement; two of which are of special recourse here. The first recommendation for a decolonial approach to big data is to 'bring agency to the centre of the observation of both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms and practices' (ibid. 2); a procedure I have attempted to implement by presenting my data visualisations of Aragalaya hashtag data to research participants and asking them to co-produce knowledge with me. The outcome of this bottom-up process has allowed me to engage with and consider alternative data realities to the hegemonic reality proposed by the data visualisations. In addition, this process has brought forward Milan and Trere's fourth recommendation for a global south perspective on data. They suggest we need to 'take infrastructure seriously, unpacking the complex flows (of relationships, data, power, money, and counting) they harbour, generate, shape and promote' (ibid. 3). I argue that the procedure of learning to code, scraping big data from

Twitter, visualising it with opensource tool, Gephi, making my own analysis, and then presenting the spatialisation graphs to Lahiru and others and observing their interpretations, has proved to be an effective and committed way of taking infrastructure seriously. This process, ultimately, has contributed to me deeply scrutinising the validity of a raft of taken-for-granted infrastructures in traditional data science modalities; for example, 1) Twitter's API access as a reliable repository of data, 2) open-source tools such as Gephi which despite their democratic potential and full of bugs and system failures, and 3) the Force Atlas algorithm as an opaque spatialisation system seemingly without limits.

4.6 | Hacking as decolonial approach

While I stop short of claiming a decolonial approach to computing and big data, in the concluding part of the chapter, I turn to the potential consequences of this emergent decolonial methodological and what new findings the procedure has enabled me to deduce. In researching digital capital as a phenomenon that manifests in and through the datafication of social media influence, and introducing the practice of augmented ethnography and the implementation of data visualisations into my fieldwork engagement with participants, I have been forced to confront long standing questions in relation to digital culture studies, such as, how can we breach a digital milieu that is built on opaque data practices and black boxed algorithms? Following boyd's (2012) use of the term 'aura', I suspect that the opaqueness, vastness and inaccessibility of digital data is what gives it it's mercurial reputation. Therefore, in a world where our research subjects are invariably datafied, I argue it is (digital) anthropology's job to interrogate the data of our datafied research participants to deconstruct this mythology and demonstrate how data is

less robust and stable than first held. Ricaurte suggests that 'data-driven rationality is supported by infrastructures of knowledge production developed by state, corporations and research centres situated mainly in western countries and an economic system that supports capital accumulation and economic growth', (Ricaurte, 2019). Given anthropology's long history of breaking down dominant epistemologies, I argue ethnography is the ideal tool to show the value of qualitative engagement and the fragility of digital data, contributing to the dismantling of the entrenched epistemology that 1) big data reflects reality, (2) big data analysis generates the most valuable and accurate knowledge, and (3) the results of big data processing can be used to make better decisions about the world. (Ricaurte, 2019)

One recurrent theme in my ethnographic experiences among Sri Lankan information influencers was the prevalence of being hacked, but, critically, not hacking someone else. Given the entrenched masculine framing of hackers perhaps this is to be expected. In his various ethnographic encounters with hackers, John Postill suggests that hackers 'are often hardware makers, programmers, security researchers and system administrator' (2018, page). The Sri Lankans I collaborated with were very different: Bosco was a flight attendant, Siri is a social worker, and most of the others are marketers of some description, thereby portraying a much more feminised labour force. I believe this confirms my conceptualization that the people of my study are closer to influencers and suggests an entrenched patriarchy as to why they are more prone to being hacked, than hacking others. If hackers are male and influencers are female, is it any wonder that hackers look to dominate digital capital and colonise digital spaces?

In a spirited show of defiance, rather than being the victim or bystander of hacking, digital anthropologist Hannah Knox proposes the hack 'as a

concept that has the capacity to denote a relationship with data that takes it not just as a stable representation that we need to deconstruct, but also as a means of engaging with relations that are imprecise and unknown and whose imprecision and unknowability become a frame for action.' (Knox, 2021, 11) In other words, the complex and opaque elements of digital communications such as big data should not be perceived to be out of reach or inscrutable due to our technical insufficiencies. Instead, data should be treated as a thing to be 'hacked', in whatever guise that takes, shifting representation from a form of description to a site of action. The result of my decision to hack the data that Twitter automatically collects and stores has profound and enduring conclusions, both, conceptually, for how I theorise digital capital and, methodologically, for how I advance augmented ethnography as a methodological innovation that could have significant benefit for how anthropologists traverse our new datified existences, contributing to a potentially decolonial approach to data.

At a conceptual level, the two ethnographic descriptions above, first of Lahiru reinterpreting the Sri Lanka Twittersphere via my homemade data visualisations and, second, Bosco and Faz's egregious cases of being hacked, have informed how I theorise digital capital as a useful heuristic for the ethnographic engagement in the complex, emergent processes of influence on social media through its traces in digital data. The data visualisation's identification of the myriad bots in the Sri Lanka Twittersphere during the Aragalaya protests that they are not passive nodes but actively interacting with the political elite's content and are therefore highly likely to be amplifying pro-governmental rhetoric, points towards the intrinsic value of digital capital in the race for political influence in real life (IRL). Why else would bots be mobilised if not to discredit influential social media users and those who are identified to be able to spread an anti-government rhetoric. Equally, the case example of Bosco's 'crypto' hacking across his Meta platforms, and Faz's

unimaginable clash with child pornography, underscore my argument that social media users who have a significant digital capital stockpile to potentially disrupt the status quo are likely to fall victim to nefarious schemes and machinations. I should add that the majority of the 20 information influences that I worked closely with had stories of being hacked.

Methodologically, my two-stage augmented ethnography innovates on two levels. First, I identified and confronted an enduring shortcoming in the burgeoning field of influencer studies: a resistance to adopting digital methods, an invaluable research praxis when previously implemented to identity bot and irregularly social media activity. By making a bold decision to meet this shortcoming head on, my research entered debates about the homogenising potential of data and its relationship with the colonial impulse for uniformity over alterity. Due to my own uncertainty about the credibility of data, and specifically the trustworthiness of Twitter as platform and the tools being used to create data visualisations such as the open-source product Gephi and its Force Atlas algorithm, plus my deep commitment to the traditions of ethnography, I responded to the call from Milan and Trere and looked to find a 'bottom up' perspective on big data. The coproduction of knowledge on VNA pointed out the limitations of the computational processes and the validity of the data that underpin it. By inviting specialisation and interpretation from Sri Lanka participants who have been actively identified by the visualising process, I found a methodologically that potentially leads us towards a decolonial approach to data.

It would be facile of me to claim that by co-producing knowledge with information influencers I have cleared the epistemological fog and made the Sri Lankan Twittersphere during the 2022 Aragalaya protests more understandable. Rather, by interrogating the visual representation of

reality determined by the Force Atlas algorithm, it has made the site of political contestation more complex and confusing. However, the objective of this research is not to ascertain who specifically is influencing political debate, but to question assumptions about data and go on to theorise, through the phenomenon of digital capital, what this means for life on social media.

CHAPTER 5 The Affordance Folklore Framework: Self-branding, History-making and the Politics of Control

5.1 | Introduction

In this chapter I propose affordance folklore as a new framework for understanding the complex and opaque processes of social media affordances and how this affects the relationships information influencers develop with **the platform, their imagined audience and themselves**. One of the main arguments of this monograph is that social media's primary affordance is the accumulation and exchange of digital capital via the highly visible datafication of influence, and in this chapter, I will look closely at several of social media's key design features to **demonstrate how these emergent affordances contribute to accumulation and exchange of digital capital**. For fifteen years, the correlation between a social media's design architecture and the social outcomes they offer have been framed in the language of affordances (boyd, 2010, Hopkins, 2019), and platforms are broadly recognised as affording outcomes in relation to the subjective experience of the user (Davis, 2020). Algorithmic folklore is defined as a collection of 'beliefs and narratives about moderation systems [i.e. social media algorithms] that are passed on informally and can exist in tension with official accounts' (Savolainen, 2022, 1092). Rather than focus specifically on what platforms afford users, via the affordance folklore framework, this chapter interrogates the *Darian Gap* between what behaviours platforms are designed to encourage and agential practices that manipulate, challenge or ignore these structuring

conditions. Following *Chapter 4*'s emphasis on a decolonising approach to data, the objective here to introduce how a bottom-up, folkloric approach to affordances could path the way for how anthropology engages in social media studies.

What is affordance theory? Originally conceived by ecological psychologist James J. Gibson, to theorise the relationship between animals and their natural environment, affordances tell the story of what 'things furnish, either for good or ill' (Gibson, 1966, 285). More recently, and in relation to human-computer-interaction (HCI) studies, affordance theory refers to the specific outcome a non-sentient thing allows its sentient interlocutor. In the book, 'Monetizing the individual self: The emergence of the lifestyle blog and microcelebrity in Malaysia', Julian Hopkins (2019) argues via the application of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) that affordances are more complex than merely a digital technology affording a social outcome or not, rather they are an unbounded assemblage of technological entanglements, and affordances are therefore better conceived as either 'basic' or 'emergent'. Basic affordances are 'ontological' pre-programmed design features that are 'intrinsic to the blog medium itself', while emergent affordances are not 'reducible to any particular programmable code' but materialise when constituent elements of the blog interface with each other to create new and actionable outcomes. The obvious critic of this technological-centric understanding of digital technology overlooks the user subjectivity in how affordances operate. Jenny Davis (2020; see also Davis and Chouinard, 2016) offers the *Mechanisms of Affordance* model, denoting six specific directives of how objects and humans interact. Some technologies make *requests and demands of people, whilst others encourage, discourage, refuse and allows* certain behaviours. Whilst Davis' concedes the six mechanisms are not exclusive of one another, her vision to separate affordances from a faux binary of an object merely affording or not

affording specific behaviours is highly instructive because technological affordances are relational to the human interlocuter's cognitive knowhow, physical capacity, and the institutional setting of the interaction. Continuing the people-centred approach, digital anthropologist, Elizabeth Costa, argues through her ethnography of everyday Facebook usage in rural Turkey, that 'people use the platform in creative and active ways that both designers and social media scholars have not envisaged' (Costa, 2016, 6349). By calling people's singular relationships and encounters with platforms as *affordances in practice*, Costa suggests that the practice of affordance manipulation is a kind of agential resistance against the hegemonic power of social media platforms. In this chapter I look to develop a new ethnographic method that considers the dual importance of platform-centred and people-first approaches.

Analytically, to consider both platform affordances and user affordances, I introduce the *Affordance Folklore Framework* to identify the functionalities and affordances of ten discrete design features, and to recognise how affordances operate in (and out) of practice via a collection of folkloric responses to the opacity of platform operations. The discursivity of folklore may seem antithetical to the rationality of technical affordances, but folk theories proliferate in a digital ecosystem popularly euphemised as a 'black box society' (Pasquale, 2015); the widespread notion that the inner workings of how social media platforms operate and why certain users prosper and go *viral* whilst others fail is unbeknown, even to platform designers (Cotter, 2023). Social medias are generally free to access, and most users only require internet connectivity and an active email address or mobile telephone number to participate. However, platforms do not come with an instructional manual (or pop-up hints and tips as is customary in contemporary gaming), so new and experienced users are implicitly guided by persuasive user experience design (UX) that encourages certain behaviours, often in the service of data collection or

profit. I argue that the behaviours that the social media encourages are 1) *platform affordances*, but the behaviours that the individual user chooses to adopt are 2) *affordances in practice*, and the behaviours they resist, or overlook are 3) *affordances out of practice*. A combination of these entanglements creates what I call *affordance folklore*: a discursive and performative response that users exhibit to navigate the opacity of platforms, and the inherent dangers associated with public dissent in Sri Lanka, while maintaining their own objectives of political participation and digital capital accumulation.

Due to the extraordinary scope of what social medias' offer users, a single chapter cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of all the affordances a platform could be or are used for. Understandably, I draw attention to the affordances that emerge as salient for the wider thesis's argument that the accumulation and exchange of digital capital is the foundational logic of social media interaction. As such, I present the three emergent affordance folk theories gleaned via extensive participant collaboration under the banners of: 1) self-branding, 2) *history-making* and 3) politics of control. These thematic components are not new to the literature on digital culture studies, but the collaborative process of guided interviews, social media walkthroughs (Light, et al, 2018) and digital ethnography provides rich ethnographic evidence that folklore affordances are a form of resistance against the oppressive surveillance of social media and its notorious opacity. The main thesis of internet researchers, Bonini and Trere, recent book, 'Algorithms of Resistance' is that 'algorithms, as well as producing oppression, can also be appropriated by users to resist the power of technology companies' (2024, page). They compare *appified* food delivery labour practices in Italy (and other gig economy workers prone to algorithmic governance) to the Malaysian peasants of James Scott's famous anthropological study (Scott, 1987), demonstrating how by backsliding on tasks and finding ways to trick the algorithm to provide gig

workers more time to rest or deliver a job is a contemporary reconceptualization of the micro-resistance enacted by rural people in a Malaysian village forced into the globalising garment industry. My hypothesis is that we should be careful not to frame small acts of resistance on social media as *weapons of the weak* because the black box of platform culture affords gaslighting behaviours that inspire fear and confusion in users leading to platform addiction and burnout (Cotter, 2023).

The objective of introducing the *Affordance Folklore Framework* is to understand the proliferating practices and dynamics of social media use amongst information influencers in Sri Lanka. As we will see in *Chapter 7* and the story of Wasantha's release from prison, information influencers mobilise their digital capital via social media to organise collectively, call out corruption and advocate for system change to manifest real-world transformations. In this chapter I want to examine the actual behaviours and interactions with platform design features and ontologies that contribute to the systemic affordance of digital capital accumulation. The affordance folklore framework came into being due to the persistent challenge of doing ethnography of social media IRL. Watching someone use social media on their smart phone over their shoulder is a frustrating process for both ethnographer and influencer. This difficulty led me to interview participants with a guided framework that prompted tangential discussions around the discrepancy between what platforms encourage users to do, and what they do in response, and, critically, what they ignore, whether by choice or oversight. As a result of this methodological remodelling, I argue it is not only the explicit practices of interacting with fellow users—i.e. the behaviours that make social media 'social'—that allows for digital capital accumulation on social media. Rather, I suggest the underlying affordances of *self-branding*, *history-making* and *politics of*

control information influences carry out in dialogue with platforms that contribute to the holistic practice of digital capital accumulation.

The chapter is structured into five sections beginning with an account on how *Affordance Folklore Framework* came into being with Nala. The second section sheds light on the prevalence of self-branding via an ethnographic description of Piyanka's dual online and offline personas. Describing the agential practices of how users navigate the timeline feature of social media, in the third section it will emerge that the platformisation of culture provides the affordance of history-making; a profound development in a country where truth and memory has been state-owned for generations. The fourth section introduces the politics of control and how influencers stay safe in a highly volatile digital sphere. Finally, I consider how affordance folklore is a response to the black box gaslighting of platforms and how the *Affordance Folklore Framework* can help us get closer to fully comprehending how social media affordances are a complex interplay between the structural conditions of platform design and user resistance.

5.2 | The affordance folklore framework

Nala had invited me to her home in a suburb on the Southern fringes of Colombo, close to the fishing communities where you had grown up. Before this, we had met four times previously, first amongst the hubbub of the Community Assembly (forthcoming in *Chapter 7*), and several times since, enjoying iced coffees or Chinese food after her office hours. At every encounter, Nala had told me something extraordinary about her life as a 'wife, Catholic, political activist, counsellor, social media personality, master's student'. One particularly compelling story was from a recent

visit to the Jaffna peninsula with her church when she had found a lonely young girl playing in the street on her own. Nala comforted her and asked the young Tamil child to take her to home so she could meet her family. At the girl's house, Nala asked her mother, 'why is your child so sad?' The mother broke down and explained the trauma. In 2009, she had been raped by Sri Lankan soldiers in the final months of the war and her child was the outcome. When the mother looked at her child, she saw the eyes of her perpetrator. Nala had taken to Facebook to describe this encounter, and in response was called a 'liar', 'terrorist', 'terrorist sympathizer' and told to 'go live in the North' by scores of fellow social media users. Perhaps partly due to Nala being a Sinhala-Catholic, a relatively small minority amongst the majority Sinhala-Buddhists, she is often victim to this kind of vitriolic and hateful speech on social media. Another contributing factor may be that she has accumulated a significant following on social media and trolling and hate speech seem to be ubiquitous conditions for any social media user with an enviable stockpile of digital capital.

Nala always showed remarkable strength when discussing these kinds of episodes and insisted on continuing even when I was welling up. However, I often felt no closer to really understanding the influencer's relationship with their platform because social media, as a material phenomenon and social practice, was absent from the ethnographic encounter. Although profound, the conversation about Nala's social media usage to truth-tell on the horrors of war and the subsequent abuse she received did not get close to what I really wanted to know. **I wanted to understand, what did Nala do specifically to reduce or cope with the abuse?** How did this affect her future Facebook activity? Did she opt to mute abusers, fight-fire-with-fire, report perpetrators or adjust her Facebook's settings? We were both often inclined to search through our smart phones or my laptop during conversations to reference content and activity, but this process of searching, scrolling, and waiting tended to then skew conversation flow.

After in-person meetings, we would (naturally) continue the conversation by sharing snippets on *WhatsApp* or *Facebook Messenger*, which felt closer to the materiality of actual engagement with social media, but merely communicating via digital technologies did not necessarily mean we were critically engaging with digital technologies. With my growing interest in the field of how social media affords influence, and what I have come to theorise as digital capital since, I wanted to understand how the specific design features and functionalities of social media create the environment for influence to be gathered, maximized and lost.

The challenge of researching social media's functioning IRL led me to develop what I call the affordance folklore framework (see diagram 1).

The first step was to identify the reoccurring architectural design features that materialise across all social media platforms (see column 2 diagram 1). Informed in part by my own native use of social media this process was easier than expected but also perhaps because social media platforms are undergoing a process of homogenization insofar as they appear to mimic and reproduce the successful design features of other platforms to remain relevant and competitive. The second step was to configure a structured interview format that encouraged conversations on the reoccurring design feature around three salient questions of interest:

1. *What does the platform encourage the influencer to with this designed feature? (column 3)*
2. *What does the influencer specifically do with the design feature? (column 4)*
3. *What does the influencer not do with the design feature? (column 5)*

The ambition of the three-pronged line of questioning was to not only ascertain what influencers do in practice, but to interrogate the intersection between what the platform allows users to do and what behaviours they ignore or overlook. Following the classical anthropological trope that there is a distinction between what people say they do and what people really do, the answers to the questions were corroborated with empirical observations and further probed with additional questions. **Latterly, I considered the three answers, cross referenced with walkthroughs, over the shoulder observations and wider interactions to infer a folkloric response.**

#	Design Feature	Platform Affordance	Affordance in Practice	Affordance out of Practice
1	Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personalization. A range options are available: Real names vs alias, gender, DoB, hometown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-branding. Influencers speak of profile as a brand, using pictures that display them with influencer IRL (i.e. with a microphone, in front of crowd) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Privacy and Safety. Only one opted for anonymity with no name or identifiers (images are generally always embodied, no images of landscapes or anything random)
2	Post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life-streaming. A range of media modalities are available – textual, image, video, enabling life-streaming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple. Influencers post for variety of reasons, often in the same day: seeking justice, validation, expressing humour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-censorship. Influencers self-censor, resisting urge to rant, troll & shitpost nationalists and losers
3	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community building. Comments, emojis & reposts enable community building & explicitly enable flow of digital capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability. It is easy to add hyperlinks, screenshots + other components to build evidence & influence in debates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intimacy. Despite prevalence of DM's, influencers rarely encourage followers intimately, especially female-to-male

4	Timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete history of posts + interactions are visible & searchable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Truth making. Influencers use timelines to hold others & themselves to account. Screen shotting trolls + bad comments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> History unmaking. Influencers do not like to make edits or revisions on past content (or so they say, it is impossible to verify – what is deleted, is deleted)
5	Feed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial transaction. Evolving stream of preferential content mixed with adverts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limitless. Sense of unlimited content as incessant stream updates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content Moderation. Influencers try to resist interacting with hate + ads so feed is not overcome but often fail
6	Followers Count	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Metrication. Users are ordered by follower list indicates influence and popularity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital capital metrics are a source of pride + power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict. Influencers are conflicted to remove bots + bad actors as visible digital capital is important but may skew engagement analytics
7	Notifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent Use. Notifications provide users of all manner of reminders: post metrics, new followers, interactions, often in relation to digital capital accumulation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Control vs Addiction. Influencers express hugely different experiences of notifications. Control over notifications imply control over platform. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health. Influences without notification best practice suffer burnout + addiction
8	Monetization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercialisation. Monetization practices are not obvious but hidden away in addition settings section of platform. Only a small fraction of users qualify for monetization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curiosity. Influences curious about monetizing their brand/accounts but also resist commercial incentive otherwise risk losing political clout. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black market deals. Influences repeated approached for under the table deals. One had cash offer to sell account due to impressive accumulation of digital capital.
9	Analytics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-Optimization. Engagement metrics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety. Analytics are a source of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perfection. Despite anxiety, seldom to

		offer opportunity to improve and optimize content.	anxiety as there is always better work to be done. Ignoring analytics feels like a mistake.	influencers have time to spend mastering analytics.
10	Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Control. A range of settings incl preferential elements to above components 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety + Security. Settings are used to block, mute, unfriend hateful followers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deactivation. Deactivating account is hard to find + one influencer removed her account entirely (temporarily)

Figure 16: the Affordance Folklore Framework complete with answers from participants and observations on their behaviours.

Thus, to return to Nala’s and me fifth meeting, where we sat adjacently on her L-shaped couch, whilst Nuwan, her husband, was in the kitchen preparing deviled chicken, we work through the affordance folklore framework together. Through this structured conversation about the specific design features of Facebook we spoke for a long time about how she engages (or not) with the 'Settings' section of the world’s most popular and profitable platform. On the first question, Nala explains what Facebook *allows* her to do with the settings:

'Everything. You can block people, unfriend, you can restrict, you can manage your timeline, you can decide who you are going to allow on your timeline. You can decide how much time that you are going to use on Facebook, you can decide what are the [photo] albums that are publicly available? Like it gives everything'

Two points are clear from this response. One, Nala is aware that Facebook provides her many options to make her page and activity more secure, and two, she perceives the affordances of her settings to be for precisely that: safety. She does not mention a myriad of other settings available, around

languages, regionality, content types and so forth, that have a manifold of other socio-technical affordances. We may call Nala's understanding of the settings 'platform affordance' because this is what the platform *encourages* her, but it not what she puts into practice, per se. Contrarily, in practice, the only time Nala has personally looked at 'settings' was to deactivate her account. This has happened twice before; once to focus on studying during an especially busy exam period, and the other time, most recently, when she was victim of a relentless and targeted hate campaign against her, and the trauma became too much to bear. She confesses that she only managed to deactivate her account for six days because the pull of the platform and the connection it provides bought her back. Since then, she has permitted her more 'tech-savvy younger brother' into her 'settings' to make some minor tweaks to the operating system. Gehan, who is her cousin, but she calls him brother, has changed one component of her privacy settings so other users cannot post directly to Nala's 'timeline', delimiting the abuse she receives from trolls (but not ending it). Evidently, there are emerging distinctions between the *platform* affordances, or what the platforms allows, and the affordances that are actively *in practice*, and moreover, notably *out of practice*. Furthermore, in Nala's case example, the affordances *in practice* are implemented by her younger cousin adding complexity to the notion that affordances are relational to the user. In Davis' (2016) original Conditions of Affordances model, technological outcomes are relational to the individual user's physical dexterity, intellectual knowhow and cultural setting, which is undeniably accurate, but that does not account for how technological affordances are advanced or changed by auxiliary support from other human interlocutors.

In addition to shedding light between what platforms allow, and what influencers do and what they not do, by speaking deeply about the precise design features of the platform, Nala revealed a folkloric response to her relationship with her safety and visibility on Facebook. Nala's truth-telling

activist content, such as the story of the Tamil mother and girl, is regularly reported by fellow users as breaching community guidelines (a move, she presumes, adopted by haters and trolls in order to deplatform her content by reappropriating an affordance designed to protect users against abuse and should have special recourse for a female activist such as Nala). The outcome of the repeated reportage for breaching guidelines was a direct message from Facebook saying, 'if I violate their community standards one more time, they are going to block my account forever'. Nala was very upset by this message because, in her mind, she had never violated their community standards; moreover, she questioned, who is Facebook protecting, because it does not feel like they are protecting me? In the same breath, Nala also suggested that her being reported by fellow users started happening around 2019; around the time Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa returned to political office following the devastating Easter Sunday Attacks that had galvanized widespread popular support amongst the Sinhala-Buddhist majority to reinstall the despotic leader who had seen the country through the civil war in 2009. Nala was implying that due to Rajapaksa's return to power, there had either been an increase in people reporting content that does not align with the rhetoric of Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalists, or Rajapaksa had brokered a deal with Facebook to remove content not adjacent to his political goals. Algorithmic folklore has previously been defined as performative and discursive practices that social users adopt to deal with and overcome the opacity of social media platform's functionality. I consider Nala's remarks about Facebook serving the politically powerful as a repertoire of algorithmic folklore. Because Nala has no access to who and why people are reporting her content for breaching decency guidelines, she is left to the join dots and infer conclusions that somehow make sense about what Facebook is affording her, despite a lack evidence.

I repeatedly came across examples of what I call *folklore affordances* amongst information influencers in Sri Lanka, on varying degrees of mythological complexity. The reason why Nala's case example is perhaps distinct from previous iterations of algorithmic folklore is that Nala's experience not only wrestles with the opaque algorithmic systems of social media affordances, but it is deeply bound to her local understanding of politics and governance in Sri Lanka. In *Chapter 2*, I wrote about the Sri Lankan government's history of restricting media freedoms, and their recent repeated use of internet shutdowns during times of crisis and violence, creating a sense that they government somehow has ownership or control over social media platforms. Moreover, the internet shutdowns create an information chasm as crimes go unreported and justice is difficult to pursue after the fact, cultivating a feeling of mistrust in society and institutions. Nala's affordance folklore therefore appears to not only be inferred by the opaque conditions of social media environment, but the wider socio-political sphere of Sri Lanka IRL.

In the subsequent three sections, I explore the affordances of self-branding, truth-making, and the politics of control. The overall purpose is to show the value of the framework in eliciting emotional and practical responses to the vast scope of social media affordances and demonstrating the nuances between what affordances platforms encourage, what affordances are in practice with influencers, and which ones they overlook or ignore. In the final section, I return to the argument around folklore affordances.

5.3 | Self Branding as a social media standard

Meeting people IRL who I have previously met or chatted with online can be a slightly disconcerting experience. People are always, on first impressions at least, somehow different. Sometimes the difference is cosmetic, such as they are much smaller or taller than I had imagined, or sometimes, like in the case of Yanki, the difference is ontological. You see, Yanki is *actually* called Piyanka Premadasa; Yanki being his playful social media persona, while Piyanka was a private consultant who trains activists and journalists on social media tactics and best practice. On Twitter, Piyanka had over 15,000 Twitter followers and he referred to himself as one of 'the original social media 'buzz-makers' in Sri Lanka'. Several years ago, when Twitter was still in its relatively infancy in Sri Lanka, he had set up his own hashtag, #YankiGifts, where he would surprise random followers IRL, at work or on the street, with a gift; a cuddly toy or food hamper. Around this time, Piyanka had also been in a consultancy position between the Sri Lankan and US Embassy. Despite Mark Zuckerberg, the droid-like CEO of Meta (prev. Facebook), famously claiming that 'having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity' (Kirkpatrick, 2011, 199), I was becoming accustomed to the notion that my research participants would oftentimes have distinct online and offline personas, and/or indeed, multiple online personas. Indeed, this seemed to echo the pre-internet sociological position that we all put on different 'faces' for different 'stages' to carefully manage our reputation and relationships for specific social environments and audiences (Goffman, 1959).

The most notable difference between Yanki and Piyanka, was that IRL, Piyanka was at least 10 years older than his Twitter profile picture, which had him speaking into a microphone, donned in 'camo' t-shirt, oversized glasses and 'hipster' beard and moustache. In front of me, Piyanka's thinning hair and wispy facial hair aged him around 40 years old, and dressed in white tunic, grey slacks and leather shoes, he was the epitome of professionalism. Immediately, I liked his relaxed energy, which was

juxtaposed with the aggressive air conditioning of his office: a signal, I have come to note, of success [only the poor suffer Colombo's extreme heat at work]. His office felt familiar to the tens of Sri Lankan tech and start-up CEO's I had interviewed previously¹: trophies and awards scattered the walls and shelves, and his desk was populated by Buddhist trinkets and family photographs of children smirking.

How to make sense of the social media affordance of pseudonymisation? To begin, let us zoom in on one specific design feature of platform architecture: the profile page. As danah boyd (2010) rightly theorised, curating a personalised public profile is one of the quintessential features of social media (alongside the ability to access a list of a fellow user's followers), and almost always enables a user to add a username, profile picture and short biography or 'bio'. Platforms often tend to encourage fine tuning the personalisation of one's profile to include location, education attainments, career, and cultural interests and leisurely habits such as favourite movies, music and sport. The design feature that 'completes' one's profile, so to speak, is often a 'cover photo'; a wide-angle photo, separate to one's profile picture, that provides a kind of *mise-en-scène* to one's personal homepage.

Information influencers tend to populate their profile pages with accurate information, especially their interests, politics and visual representation, however, many, like Piyanka, pseudonymize their username². This affordance in practice appears to enable a veneer of privacy, and, on the surface at least, a sliver of anonymity, allowing the influencers of my study to distance their real-world selves from their online content, a necessary tactic one may suspect in a country notorious for its heavy-handedness towards political dissidents. However, I suggest that the drive for privacy and anonymity is only superficial or futile because, as we already know from the shocking description of hacking and surveillance in *Chapter 4*,

alias's do not protect influencers from harm and distress. The postulation that the affordance of pseudonymization is privacy is, therefore, either dysfunctional or incorrectly designated.

Why, then, does Piyanka, like so many other users with large followings, use an alias on social media? Another of my closet research participants, Siri, an undergraduate renown for her feminist commentary on women's health, sexual harassment and equal rights, uses a truncated version of her second name as her alias on Twitter. Throughout the 18 months of fieldwork of observing her social media activity, every three months or so, Siri would change her public username to include elements of what's she currently focusing on, so her username would read something like 'Siriisbusyresearching' or 'Siriistakingsometimeoff'. Unlike Piyanka, Siri updated her profile picture regularly, prescribing strict protocols around it. She changes her profile picture most weeks, and the photo is nearly always of her doing something professional like holding a microphone at a public speaking gig. Her theory is that people get the idea: 'this girl is capable of something.'

To articulate what her twitter's profile pages affords, Siri would frequently describe her own practices as 'building her own brand', going on to say, 'your brand is more important than your name'. Self-branding has previously been defined as 'individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital' (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Self-branding on social media is about establishing a reputation based on aspirational virtues that outshine others to foster loyalty and admiration amongst fellow users. Various scholars have argued that self-branding has become normalised via the conditioning of social media and its implicit relationship with neoliberalism. For example, Theresa's Senft (2008) landmark study on erotic online performances (called 'camgirls') was one of the first ethnographers to entrench what is now the familiar

notion of 'building the self as brand' in the Web 2.0 era. In addition, the early adopters of Twitter in Alice Marwick's book, *Status Update*, constructed highly personalised profiles and marketed themselves like celebrities to be consumed by a 'fan base' (Marwick, 2013).

In their often-cited article, 'Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers', the authors Khamis, Ang & Welling (2016) identify three main reasons for the proliferation of self-branding as a standard for contemporary life. They write:

- '1) social media tacitly promises fame (and subsequent wealth) to 'ordinary' users and thus encourages practices of micro-celebrity.
- (2) Within a political culture of neoliberal individualism, self-branding is encouraged with the promise of reward.
- (3) The commercial viability of some Social Media Influencers whose success depends on self-branding and practices of micro-celebrity, has proven to be both inspirational and seemingly replicable'

It is important to point out that the behaviours associated with self-branding are not reserved for influencers because social media fosters microcelebrity behaviours in all users. However, the affordance of self-branding is sometimes most clearly visible with users who have accumulated large quantities of digital capital because they may have consciously curated a (successful) brand for consumption. For example, the most 'successful' Twitter account in in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere that I encountered who was not a leading politician has over 250,000 followers. This highly successful information influencer operates under the pseudonym, 'Sri Lanka Twitter #1'. When I met and interviewed the man behind the wildly popular account, I had been curious to ask Dhammika, would he be so popular on social media if his username was

his real name? Of course, he could not say, but we both agreed that his pseudonymised username of 'The Sri Lanka Tweet' was eminently more followable than 'Dhammika' because he had developed a conceptual brand that encompassed authority, locality and totality. To be a Sri Lankan on Twitter and to follow 'Sri Lanka Twitter #1' *just makes sense*.

Despite most ordinary people not having such an extraordinary accumulation of digital capital, or such clever self-branding, I would argue that the very act of completing a profile page on social media, which is a technical requirement on most social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, is to engage in the platform affordance of self-branding. The basic act of choosing a profile picture is to curate a version of the codified presentation of the self for consumption. Equally, the selection of a name, whether an accurate representation of one's given name or pseudonymised alias, is a to self-brand. One of the main arguments of this monograph is that the primary affordance of social media is the accumulation and exchange of digital capital. In this chapter I argue that one of the main enablers of digital capital acquisition is the ability to self-brand and build a social media persona that is desirable and consumable by fellow users.

5.4 | The history-making machine

In attempt to try and record the issues and topics that appeared to shape and be shaped by Sri Lankan culture and society, during the 18-month fieldwork period, I tracked several of the most popular and problematic stories that raced through the Sri Lankan media sphere. The controversial story of the Sri Lanka cricketer, Danushka Gunathilaka, who alleged raped an Australian female whilst on tour with the national team hit the headlines

in November 2022 and became a highly contested topic on social media. The story seems to encapsulate the conflicting concerns of the collective Sri Lankan hive mind: the importance of cricket and sport in cultivating the national Sri Lankan identity (especially internationally vis-a-vis South Asian neighbours India, Pakistan and Bangladeshi, but also old colonial lines with the UK and Australia), the endemic of misogyny, plus burgeoning pockets of feminism and resistance to the entrenched patriarchy. One of the female participants of my study, Amanda, was a Twitter information influencer who was studying for her master's outside of Sri Lanka. She told me via a Zoom call that Sri Lankans have a culture that whenever something 'big' happens that demands public attention, it is almost a civic duty to 'choose a side, go to social media to say your piece and wait for the reaction from your friends and haters'. In this case of Sri Lanka cricketer icon Danushka Gunathilaka, the debate was dichotomous: *the cricketer was guilty and should go to hell, or the Australian woman asked for it and he is innocent*. Amanda describes her Twitter and Facebook timeline, the design feature of social media that displays all of a user's past activity including the precise time and dates of interactions with fellow users and the content shared, as a historical record of what she and her audience have thought was important and worth debating in the past fifteen years, and, importantly, where she 'stood' at the time. Indeed, I contend that the ubiquitous feature of the social media timeline provides an affordance of history making; a construct, that is highly significant in a country where truth, media and memory have been previously under state ownership for generations (Hughes, 2013).

Facebook has undergone major cosmetic and functional overhauls since its conception in the mid-noughties, from material changes to cope with the development of outside technologies, for example, the ability to post and record videos directly to Facebook in line with embedded smartphone

video technology, to more discreet changes that have less obvious causation. In 2011, Facebook jettisoned the user's 'wall' design and introduced the user 'timeline'. Functioning as a depository of the user's entire Facebook activity, the timeline presents a record of *all* your birthday messages, *all* the products you have bought or sold on marketplace, *all* the photos you have shared and plenty more besides. The temporal element means the content is ordered chronologically into hyperlinked years which makes older posts easily accessible. A composite component of the timeline are notifications sent from the platform to user with reminders about the content they have published and shared in the past. Group photos that have multiple friends tagged seems to be the most popular reminder, presumably because if the user comments/or reshares the image, the algorithmically charged system will send notifications to the tagged friends and perpetuate the interaction. The platform affordance of the timeline is complex, beyond providing each user a repository of their content, it grants the platform the rationale to send notifications, in turn, producing repeated and persistent use.

A 2017, co-authored article, 'Uncovering longitudinal life narratives: scrolling back on Facebook' appeared in *Qualitative Research journal* (Robards & Lincoln, 2017). As the title suggests, the focus was to develop a programmatic methodology to sociology's qualitative longitude research (QLR) standard. In addition to the methodological contribution, the article makes some very useful observations about Facebook's timeline feature and what this means for how users interact with notions of history-making. 'For many', the authors write, 'Facebook has come to represent an archive of memories that can be edited, reorganised, modified, reconfigured, re-presented and even deleted' (ibid. 717). Before I explore the practice and ethics of history-making with my participants below, I want to emphasise how the article also rightly points out that, 'Facebook itself...also exercises a great deal of control' by curating timelines for the opaque process of

third-party marketing and profit extraction (ibid. 717). While the concept of affordances is barely mentioned in the article, by drawing attention to the complex and conflicting outcomes of what the design feature of the timeline offers, Robards & Lincoln get close to my concern of how affordances serve the two primary stakeholders of platforms, users and proprietaries, differently.

How, then, does history-making affect the user ontological objective of accumulating and exchanging digital capital on social media? Siri says she will not follow another user on Twitter without a thorough assessment of their previous online history, and that includes reviewing their social media timelines. This affordance of user accountability can be used, and is expected to be used, in reciprocity, and therefore produces a sense of constant surveillance. What started for Siri as an innocuous habit of posting on social media as a teenage girl has transformed not only into a history-making machine but, in turn, instructs how she should behave on social media and the virtues she looks for in fellow users (to order to qualify them to exchange digital capital). Similarly, Nala concedes her timeline is a historic record of how she has 'behaved' in the past and how she has 'reacted'. She squirms at the thought of her teenage self, especially the photos tagged of her from 'back in the day'. However, unlike the description offered by Robards and Lincoln (2017), Nala does not consider deleting them as that would sanction some form of memory loss, and that may be seen as trying to edit the past or subvert reality. Of course, it is impossible to verify Nala's claim that she does not delete or edit her past content (what is there is there and what is gone is gone), but there is evidently an emotional component in how she would like to be seen to be organising her social media's presence to portray some level of objective truth.

A recent journal special issue on 'Digital Truth-making: Anthropological Perspectives on Right Wing Politics and Social Media in 'Post-Truth' Societies' broadly argues that truth is increasingly individually construed and prone to emotional entanglements thanks to the affordances of social media vis-a-vis the demise of the legacy media institutions (Bareither, et al, 2023). Whilst we know that post truth is not a new phenomenon and we should not valorise a pre-internet era for being *more* truthful (Campos Valverde, 2023), social media can clearly be seen to be extending post truth politics. For example, Donald Trump's own social media platform, *Truth Social*, which he incorporated in October 2021 after being banned from Twitter following the US Capitol riots in the previous January, affords users the ability to publish their own 'truths'. On Truth Social, the design feature normally euphemised as 'post' across most social media platforms (but called a 'tweet' on Twitter and a 'snap' on Snapchat) is called 'compose truth', demonstrating how truth in the public sphere is becoming increasingly individualised and cocurated through social media affordances (Bareither, et al, 2023). In addition, what is interesting about digital media researcher Christoph Bareither's previous work is how he has argued for the recognition of the emotional complexity of affordances. **By comparing the selfie practices of visitors to the Holocausts Memorial Site in Berlin, a highly emotive setting, Bareither's** (2019) observes that 'how the emotional affordances of the smartphone self-taking capabilities unfold depends on other emotional affordances of the material setting and on the individual actor's practice sense'. Echoing Davis theory that affordances of a technology are bound to the time and place or what she calls 'cultural setting', affordances are substantiated as a complex emotional entanglement between the individual, society and technology.

The emerging anthropological interest in the relationship between truth and social media has had an emphasis on political right-wing groups (Bareither, et al, 2023). The people of my study are in the main left-leaning

activists, but the notion of emotional affordances has board application, nevertheless. The tactics deployed by Siri and her strategic approach to her social media management are emotionally motivated. Discussing how she uses the timeline feature of Twitter, Siri describes scanning the timelines of colleagues, rivals and 'enemies' for controversial or offensive posts, such as when a politician criticises someone, and how she screenshots the tweet as 'proof'. Storing the screenshotted image in a folder on her cloud-connected device, Siri also does this when people say good things about others, in case that can swing an argument or make a point in the future. Siri also uses the Twitter search bar option in an extraordinary manner. When she was interviewing for her job as a social media account manager, Siri was aware that the organisation was very thorough, so she used the Twitter search bar to identify any incidents when she may have previously mentioned something politically sensitive, and deleted the post, thereby removing any potential awkward conversations in the future. The affordance of history-erasing may seem contradictory to the affordance of history-making, but they both lend themselves to the adjacent affordance of truth-making, enabling users to manage and reconcile their relationship with the platform and their public.

5.5 | The politics of control

Siri had chosen Independent Square as the location of our collaborative shoot on 'green initiatives', not for any political or post-colonial reasons, but because it was centrally located and provided a nice leafy backdrop for her environment message. However, finding a quiet spot to make social media content in the bustling city was tricky. In addition to the usual mix of aging pensions, gym-bros working out, and groups of students flirting under shady trees, at Independence Square that day were literally scores of soldiers from the Sri Lanka army noisily erecting scaffolding for the Sri

Lankan Independence Day celebrations that forthcoming weekend. Siri was accustomed to the presence of the army in everyday life, they had even marshalled her school, but they made me feel anxious and I kept jumping at the clang of metal as they shifted large poles from heavy-duty trucks to the celebration site. Siri was unmoved by the commotion; she was more concerned about Sri Lanka's response to climate change and had decided it was time to discuss this on her growing YouTube channel. I had volunteered to shoot the video to gather a deeper understanding of the how and why she builds influence on social media, but I quickly discovered that my one task of holding the camera still was in jeopardy because of the aggressive red ants ravaging my ankles in the open grass. Fortunately, Siri was a natural on camera, and she had the script prepared and memorised in her head, so we only took two-takes, and I could escape the fury of the ants.

When I spent time with Siri, I was often impressed with how present she was; with me, her surroundings, her filming, barely looking at her smartphone beyond checking her hair (or the tilt of her bucket hat) in the embedded camera. This was unlike several of my other research participants who clearly had very reactive and habitual relationships with digital technologies. For example, Lahiru told me with only a hint of remorse, 'I am addicted. I check Facebook or Twitter every few minutes,' suggesting there is a logical price one pays for accruing such a staggering amount of digital capital (40,000 followers). This level of addiction (or engagement?) may come as no surprise to anyone who has used social media because the platform affordances of addictive behaviours are integral to the social media's business model. By repeatedly reminding users via notification emails, texts and 'banners', the platform affordance demands persistent use. Nick Seaver (2017, 2018) is an anthropologist concerned with how platform algorithms are developed to entrap users. In his research on recommendation algorithms on music streaming

platforms, a reoccurring metaphor used by the developer community is to describe their objective as 'hooking' users (Seaver, 2018). He argues that by envisaging the opaque algorithmic systems of social media in the same material lineage as snare traps and fishing hooks we can better understand the coercive platform protocol of coaxing users into certain behaviours with bait. In the previous section on history making, I identified that a composite component of the timeline feature was the platform affordance to send repeated notifications to the user about past content to encourage persistent use. Thus, while I fully agree with Seaver's analysis and observe a clear correlation between the design features of notifications, the platforms affordances of user addition, and the capitalist demands of social media's attention economy, I also see that this overemphasis on the negatives of social media does not account for the instances when users exhibit a profoundly lucid and self-aware relationships with the tech in their pocket. For example, how does this explain Siri's seemingly un-toxic relationship with social media? More specifically, what's happens when an influencer turns off their notifications?

Once filming the video on green social work is complete, the two of us sit down for rice and chicken curry in Colombo's upmarket Cinnamon Gardens neighbourhood close to Independence Square. Here, with my laptop on the table between us, I present Siri with an iteration of the affordance folklore framework with a hint of trepidation. Previously, I had suggested talking to Valli about the specific design features of social media and specifically 'what she does with her notification settings', and I saw her eyes instantly glaze over. Therefore, I was delighted to see that Siri was thoroughly engaged! Surprisingly, she has given the less exhilarating elements of social media usage a lot of thought. As she juggles working in politics and social media, whilst studying for a degree, and operating her own hugely successful social media presence, approximately one year

ago, Siri decided that she needed to strategically configure her notifications practice and how to manage her own personal engagement with the (literally) tens of social media platforms that she operates. She is aware that platforms are designed to drain our attentions and that a potential negative affordance is persistent and repeated use leading to addiction and burnout. Indeed, because she has a 'serious job' managing busy social media accounts separate to her own personal social media following, Siri explains that she needs precise methods to separate her time away from her smart phone. As a rule, Siri only has notifications turned on for WhatsApp because that's how the closest people in her life contact her, so if something major happens, politically or personally, a friend or colleague will notify her via an instant 1-2-1 WhatsApp message. The reason she cannot have Twitter and other social media platforms' notifications turned on is because her smart phone would be constantly 'pinging', updating her with notifications of new engagements, and she would be at risk of getting *hooked* back into the platform. Instead, she schedules four-or-five dedicated 20–30-minute sessions throughout the day to attend to her Twitter engagement, starting at 6.30am when she wakes up.

The role of work and its instrumental effect on influencers' relationship with social media was a reoccurring theme through my study. In something of a chicken-and-egg syndrome, most of the information influencers I collaborated with had day-jobs or paid work in and around social media. As introduced in *Chapter 3*, Siri manages several social media platforms on behalf of a political party including the party leader's TikTok account. She has been given this duty based on her impressive followership on Twitter (a significantly different, largely text-based platform vis-a-vis TikTok's video-only content), but as should be emerging by now, the successful operation of a social media account is not *only* about the medium or quality of the content published. While she is sure her

employers have given her the responsibility because they assume she must be good at TikTok because she is good at Twitter, Siri's demonstrates how **it is a collection of discreet practices and protocols that enable various affordances to build consistent audience engagement, that is renumerated back into digital capital.** The politician's videos can generate thousands of engagements that Siri, so long as they are not politically problematic, has a task of responding too. It could be a terrifically overwhelming space to work in, but she is calm about the processes, seemingly aided by what I call the *affordances of control* that she has implemented.

There are four architectural design features, ubiquitous across all social media platforms, that offer the adept user a significant amount of control over their relationship with the platform and, in turn, themselves and their audience. On the Affordance Folklore Farmwork (Diagram, column 1), they are numbered 7) Notifications, 8) Analytics, 9) Monetization and 10) Settings. The four design features are distinct from the other elements on the framework (the Profile et al.) because they are not about public personalisation or content production but afford practical and convenient mechanisms of control for social media users. Ever since Anne Markham (1999) seminal digital ethnography on Internet Relay Chatroom (IRCs), control has been a long-held virtue of digital communications. IRCs fostered the foundational technology and sociality of what became social media, and the early adopters of what are commonly called 'chatrooms', were compelled by how these communication novel environments allowed them to control their persona, vernacular and relationships. The great draw of belonging to an (early) digital community was the asynchronicity of communications which stands in opposition to life in real time where one is forced to confront peoples and social situations that they perceive they are not ready for. Notwithstanding the habit of '90's digital ethnographers' tendency to make a sharp distinction between the

on and offline worlds, Markham's conclusive findings on the importance of control via digital communications has maintained enduring relevance.

The fact is the *affordances of control* are antithetical to the platform's business model and fiscal objectives. Perhaps this explains why this set of design features are often tucked away behind laborious UX and opaque language making it unclear whether a feature is disabled or only partly disabled (for example, a tick box to 'unsubscribe from daily notifications' implies you may expect hourly or weekly notifications going forward). However, the prevalence of controlling affordances, no matter how discreet on the platform, is a necessity because of the intensity of social media and the negative affordances that platforms enable, especially for those with a significant accumulation of digital capital who seem more prone to trolling and other forms of digital violence. The protection provided by the affordances of control are a quiet recognition of social media's negativity and a small attempt to alleviate these ills. The value of the folklore affordance framework is that it allows us to consider what the platform *encourages* (user notifications and persistence use) versus what particularly invested users do in response (such as turning off notifications or the extreme example of deactivating the platform altogether). Moreover, the framework enabled me to explore the manifestly different affordances in practice between two information influencers, Siri and Nala, who, on the surface, are demonstrably similar: both university-educated, Sinhalese females in their twenties with large social media followers. The upshot is that affordances cannot be defined by demographics but are mobilised around a complex of emotional and institutional subjectivities.

5.6 Shadow banning and the prevalence of folklore

The four ethnographic descriptions above, first describing how the Folklore Affordance Framework emerged as a methodological crutch, and the subsequent discussions on self-branding, history-making and the politics of control, add urgent and necessary complexity to existing understandings of affordance theory by expanding the fissures between the affordances that platforms allow, and affordances *in* and *out* of practice by influencers. In addition to these findings, the salience to emerge from the narratives is the highly contestable and subjective responses influencers have to the design features of social media. For example, in the case example of Nala and Siri approach to the *notifications* and *settings* rarely do two influencers share similar practices, and in instances when they do, such as Siri and Piyanka's joint preference to pseudonymise their usernames, it appears to be for critically different reasons: self-branding for Siri versus public anonymity for Piyanka.

In addition, I would like to share that the affordances described by influencers as *in practice* were, at times, demonstrably different in *actual* practice. For example, Siri's proposition that she adopts strict rules and processes around profile pictures was slightly dumbfounded whilst we are chatting one day, and she noticed that she only needed 40-something more followers to reach the new milestone of 20,000 followers on Twitter. Inspired by the nearing landmark, she quickly started thumping through the extensive photo library on her smartphone, commentating that the right photo update now could see her up to '20k' as many of her existing followers will like, emoji and/or comment on the photo, and then 'the algorithm' will amplify her profile's visibility, boosting it to users beyond her

current followership. The pull of the extra followers seemingly motivated her to drop her best in-practice protocol of only serious profile pictures of her in a position of authority (such as speaking to an audience), as she opts for a pretty head shot from a recent trip to the beach 'down South'. She says that she stops well short of body photos on Twitter, although she would ('maybe') consider posting those on Snapchat, where the design feature of disappearing content seems to afford a lessening of inhibitions and a transgression of social taboos.

This brief description of Siri's social media practices and her relationship with 'the algorithm' is demonstrative of the pioneering work of anthropologist Nick Seaver (2017, 2018). Providing perhaps the first anthropology of algorithms, Seaver convincingly argues that algorithms need to be reconceptualised not as 'in' culture, but rather 'as' culture. The distinction is important because when algorithms are theorised *in* culture, they are perceived to be remote or discreet entities that exist in digital systems and have the power to affect significant change, but only from afar. However, algorithms are not distant entities, but embodied as culture, 'because they are composed of collective human practices' (Seaver, 2018). Algorithms are not stable, homogenous forces, but actively rely on human interaction and interpretation, perpetuating shifting and changing, much like any 'culture' in all its anthropological messiness. Thus, Siri perceives 'the algorithm' to be something to interact with for her to meet her objective of accruing more digital capital (i.e. followers). Interestingly, because there are no official guidelines from Twitter suggesting that pretty profile pictures are more likely to accrue an engagement haul that will prompt the platform's content recommendations algorithm to promote the user's profile to people ordinarily outside of their network, Siri relationship with social media is reminiscent of a recent spate of studies on what has broadly been taken to be 'algorithmic folklore' (Bishop, 2019; Savolainen, 2022; McDonald, 2023;

see also de Seta, 2024a, 2024b). While I have already stated that algorithmic folklore has been defined as the 'beliefs and narratives about moderation systems that are passed on informally and can exist in tension with official accounts' (Savolainen, 2022, 1092), we should spend some time considering the conceptual term as there is some definitional ambiguity that requires unpacking.

On the one hand, and in one of the earliest studies on the concept of algorithmic folklore, Toff and Nielsen (2018) premise their research on the knowledge gap between how people find, access and navigate information in algorithmically organised digital environments such as social media and web browsers. Based on the notion 'everyone will have folk theories they rely on' (Toff & Nielsen, 2018, 641) due to the intellectual chasm between users' understanding of how web-based technologies operate and the actual algorithmic formulas and platform programming that moderate content, subsequent scholars have identified folkloric responses to content moderation in a diversity of settings. The self-styled algorithm experts of Sophie Bishop's study on YouTube influencers internalize the opaque mechanisms of platform processes to develop their own unique practices and responses or what she calls 'algorithmic lore' (Bishop, 2020). The influencers produce content describing how they 'game the algorithm' to rationalise their huge popularity, and the tutorial videos, some up to one hour long, are enthusiastically consumed by audiences also obsessed with visibility metrics (Cristin, 2020) in a content recommendation system that has no instruction manual and appears to arbitrarily award some users and not others. Continuing the discussion, MacDonald's (2023) claims algorithmic lore videos serve a dual function of subjecting users to disciplinary behaviours that situate the blame of their (in)visibility in the hands of the creators, while depicting platforms as objective intermediates, giving platforms carte blanche for social inequities that their opaque services reproduce.

On the other hand, Gabriele de Seta sees algorithmic folklore as something quite markedly different. 'Emerging from unpredictable encounters between automated systems and their users' (de Seta, 2024a, 236), his example of the viral 'Crungus', an AI generated monster that manifests via systematic prompts by internet users with a text-to-image AI generators, is distinctly different because his 'algorithmic folklore is not folklore *about* algorithms [unlike Bishop and MacDonald et al]: it is also folklore created *by* and *through* algorithms' (ibid. 240, his italics). Building on his previous work on digital folklore; that is, 'the folklore of the Internet, a vernacular emerging from below and a folk art created by users for users, coalescing into repertoires of jokes, memes, and other genres of digital content'. (de Seta, 2020, p. 180), de Seta's rendition of algorithmic folklore is plainly not related to user visibility, platform politics and social media metrication unlike the work of various other scholars. In my view, we need greater clarity around these conceptual differences, especially because both concepts have significant analytical value, and that is why I propose the concept of 'affordance folklore' to aid with the bifurcation of the two broadly different uses of algorithmic folklore. I suggest de Seta's algorithmic folklore is more accurately named given his investigations into AI-generators models is explicitly concerned with content produced by and through entanglements with algorithmic systems of generation. 'Algorithmic folklore' as situated by Toff and Nielsen, Bishop, MacDonald, Savolainen and others is a broader concept *about* algorithmic moderation and encompasses a wider articulations conversation about platform politics, visibility and metrics thereby accounting for the more inclusive affordances of social media. As previously stated, I argued that digital capital accumulation is the primary affordance of social media and therefore affordance folklore refers to the entanglement of discursive responses and behaviours users exhibit to navigate digital capital accumulation.

At the beginning of this chapter, I explored the affordance folklore provided by Nala about Facebook threatening to deplatform her account and how this seemed to coincide with the return to power in Sri Lanka of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. Curiously, this was not the only example of affordance folklore I encountered of this nature. The socialist activist Lahiru lamented that his audience engagement on Twitter had deteriorated, an occurrence that coincided with the violent dismantling of the Aragalaya by the new Ranil Wickremesinghe government that superseded the Rajapaksas in July 2022 *and* Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in October 2022. During the Aragalaya protests, Lahiru's following had grown significantly, from around 15,000 in November 2021 when we first met online at the beginning of the fieldwork period, to 37,000 the following October when we met in-person in Sri Lanka. Despite the extraordinary growth in digital capital, Lahiru analytics were suggesting that he was getting less engagement than previously. Aloud, at a birthday dinner party with his mother, girlfriend, brother and myself, he pondered, 'perhaps Ranil has signed a deal with Elon to limit my reach' suggesting, like Nala, backhand deals between the Sri Lankan government and his favourite social media platform. Then again, Lahiru mused, maybe people were only following him for protest news and now the Aragalaya is finished, people are not so interested in his content. In *Chapter 7*, I will come to explore in depth the implications of Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, but for the imminent theorisation of affordance folklore, this instance of Lahiru's folklore around his decline in engagement mirrors Nala's narrative about Rajapaksa and Facebook being in cahoots insofar as the opaque affordances of social media are deeply tied to socio-political developments IRL.

The affordance folklore expressed by both Nala and Lahiru about their decreasing visibility on Facebook and Twitter, respectively, is reminiscent

of a social media phenomenon called 'shadow banning'. Shadow banning is a content moderation technique supposedly adopted by platforms to decrease the visibility of some users and/or content that is deemed inappropriate or unvaluable (Cotter, 2023). On Instagram, the photo-centric social media site owned by Meta/Facebook, shadow banning is a common complaint amongst users (normally influencers) who experience a nosedive in user engagement around their content and who blame the platform for the dip and publicly question the ethics and intentions of the platforms. For example, Instagram has been accused of marginalising content by black activists during Black Lives Matter, and the broader instances of shadow banning has disproportionately affected people of colour, women and LGTB community, implying that platform content moderation algorithms propagate inherent bias due to them being built by CIS, white, wealthy men in Silicon Valley (ibid.). In the case of Lahiru and Nala, they had both stopped short of racializing their accusations of shadow banning, but they both insinuated that something untoward was happening between the rich and powerful of Silicon Valley and Sri Lanka government.

What is perhaps most interesting about shadow banning is that it remains unclear whether the phenomenon exists at all. Instagram (and other platform's) official statements on the prevalence and existence of shadow banning have been strikingly inconsistent and ambiguous. Kelley Cotter (2023) analysis of three different press releases on shadow banning made by Instagram where the platforms has attempted to explain to users that the reason that they may have experienced a drop in public engagements is due a range of explanations, including glitches in the system, random chance, or because creators may have produced poor content. Poetically, Cotter purposely calls the indifference demonstrated by Instagram to its own user-base as a form of 'black box gaslighting'. Gaslighting is popular parlance for a form of psychological manipulation where the oppressor

exploits unequal power asymmetries to install doubt in the victim, oftentimes leading the victim to question their version of reality or their own mental fortitude. Clearly, platforms have logical reasons to be tight-lipped about their algorithms and wider platform processes, including protecting lucrative intellectual property and mitigating themselves against legal backlash from users who suffer abuse or harm, but by not succinctly confirming the reasons, or indeed the existence, of shadow banning, platforms add to the epistemological quandary about how users can maximise platform functionality to increase their own visibility. The broader upshot of this platform ambivalence is anxiety and uncertainty among the influencer community, which may create instances of users logging on or deactivating their account entirely, but it is also more likely to perpetuate addictive behaviours as users seek answers and methods to increase their visibility.

Why do we need the new designation of *affordance folklore* when algorithmic folklore seems to sum up the unknowing around digital systems and how users make sense of it? Affordance theory has found extraordinary analytical value in social media studies yet there remain theoretical question marks around the agency of digital technologies and a gap between what users do in practice and what they overlook or ignore. By applying the novel concept of algorithmic folklore to affordances we get closer to comprehending the diversity and complexity of human-computer-interaction; a nexus I suggest that is only going to get more entangled and fertile for analysis as we enter the next stage of computation and the global roll out of AI which will develop deeper agential practices. By thinking specifically about what a technology wants users to do and being prepared to account for the behaviours the user actualises, and ones they do not, scholarship can begin to transcend the existing binary between platform-centred and people-first studies.

Anthropologically, my final comment on affordance folklore is to note that folkloric responses to platform opacity operate on a uniquely emic register and is therefore the kind of indigenous knowledge that the discipline has always attempted to access and understand. Not unlike Azande Witchcraft or any other indigenous cosmology of classic ethnographic encounters, affordance folklore constitutes a kind mythological structure of knowledge that social media users rely on to explain the inexplicable and esoteric forces that (they perceive) control their digital reality. However, while these folkloric responses can at times appear entrenched or profoundly revealing like an ancient knowledge tradition, they are can also be quickly jettisoned as the influencer reflects that they may sound as foolish or overly quixotic. In addition, regardless of whether the foundation of the affordance folklore is technical or emotional, based on empiricism or hunch, the experiential dimension of social media best practice (and the transgressive behaviours that black box culture motivates) appears to significantly determine how users engage with and interpret their relationship with the platform, their audience, and in many ways, themselves. How one deals with the uncertainty of social media is a measure of how one understands how social media functions. When influencers describe strict rules and protocols around design features and their behaviours, I also observed quite different behaviours that would contradict their self-prescribed guidelines, suggesting that social media usage is a constant gamble and process of iteration. Mirroring the fast-paced, ephemeral environment of social media, affordance folklore is also inconsistent, prone to ironies and open to breakneck change.

CHAPTER 6 The Digital IRL (i): Sri Lanka, Twitter and the Conflation of Place

6.1 | Introduction

At the beginning of my in-person fieldwork in Sri Lanka, something dramatic happened in the global media sphere that would have potentially far-reaching effects on my research and the lives of my research participants. The world's richest man, Elon Musk, acquired the world's most trusted platform for news and information, Twitter, creating global and local tensions about what this could mean for democracy and the quality of information, debate and dissent in the public sphere. In this chapter, I focus on a synchronic video-based focus group that I hosted with research participants about Musk's Twitter takeover and the subsequent conversations I had with participants to consider what recent anthropologists have called a 'field event' to 'shift the focus from the field as something that is situated in geographic and social spaces ('site'), whether physical or digital/virtual (Marcus 1995; Hine 2000; Pink et al. 2015), towards understanding the field as a collection of 'events' that are co-created within specific practices by ethnographers, their study participants, and ICTs' (Ahlin & Li, 2019, p). At the same time, I enter into dialogue with anthropologist, Matteo Candea, and his concept of 'arbitrary locations' (Candea (2007), who says that even in the traditional village ethnography of yore, the notion of a bounded field site is a myth, because the place of ethnography has always been demarcated by a various arbitrary factors outside of the control of the researcher. By bridging

together these two theories ideas together, my objective is to advance the conceptual discussions about the place of ethnography and make the proposition that in an increasingly digitally-hybrid social reality where 'outside' occurrences can have sudden and dramatic epochal shifts in the everyday lives of our recent subjects, the ethnographic site should be less considered as an arbitrary location, but closer to an arbitrary sequence of events that it is up to the ethnographer to synthesis into a coherent assemblage of meaning.

The task of the previous chapter was to illustrate the affordance folklore the people of my study built up in response to the black box of social media platforms. What transpired through the ethnographic descriptions was that affordance folklore was not only a response to the opacity of platform functionality but transgressed entrenched online/offline boundaries to consider wider concerns about governance in Sri Lanka and the politics and profits that motivate social media corporations IRL. To continue the thematic thread, the ethnographic descriptions in this chapter wrestle with the bold conflation that Sri Lanka, as a country, and, Twitter, as a platform, are analogous because they are both similarly unaccountable, compromised zones for political participation led by authoritative strongmen. The research participant who provided the outlandish analogy was Dr Hiri, one of Sri Lanka's leading experts on social media and one of the world's leading experts on social media in Sri Lanka, whom I had welcomed to host the focus group with me on Elon Musk's dramatic acquisition of Twitter. While many of the activist research participants in the focus group video call seemed ambivalent towards Elon Musk's takeover, and what this potentially means for the safety of conducting activism on Twitter, Hiri was adamant that Twitter was not a safe place, and activists should radically alter their behaviours to avoid any dangerous outcomes. Without wishing to spoil the revelations made the ethnographic descriptions below, by leaning into the conflation of Sri Lanka and Twitter

as analogous 'places', I uncover a compelling web that links ancient Buddhist relics with the world's richest man and Mahinda Rajapaksa, and a system of algorithmic governance permeating everyday reality.

Why are analogies important to ethnography? Historically, when anthropologists encountered cultural phenomena that was (ostensibly) incomparable to their western gaze, analogy was the tool employed to culturally translate the ethnographic encounter into a paradigm of western understanding and thought. Moreover, wrote Edward Burnet Taylor, analogy was an essential linguistic feature of how primitives societies construct a relationship with the unknown. In his outmoded, evolutionist perspective, anthropology's disciplinary forefather positioned *magic* as the dichotomous-other to *science*, with magic fulfilling the role of science in 'primitive societies' and science being logical destination of societal progress to rationality. More recently, Sri Lankan anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah (2017) demonstrated how the notion of analogical reasoning is a pre-modern or unscientific mechanism of communication is clearly illogical insofar as analogies are not only persistent but emblematic of how information is conveyed in all societies, especially scientific communities. Tambiah finds that analogical reasoning is a virtue of both magic *and* science but claims that they involve different genres of analogy. Science makes an analogy between known causal relationships and unknown causal relationships, whilst the typology of analogy in magic emphasises the transference of meaning from the physical into the abstract. Via an analysis of the persistent use of analogies in ethnographic material on Sri Lanka, in this chapter I look to develop a critical perspective on the role of analogies in the belief of seemingly dangerous or unproven points of view.

This chapter and the next are presented in two parts under the monograph's titular banner, 'The Digital IRL', and the objective is to contribute to weakening of the entrenched online/offline dichotomy. The

emerging subfield of digital anthropology has made (one of) its intellectual mission to remove the off/online binary that was prevalent in early internet studies (see Turkle, 1997; Baym, 2000; Hampton & Wellman, 2003), but this remains an enduring challenge because the ordinary people of our research tend to make the distinction, and they make it loud and clear. They say things like, 'Oh, I met him online', or they text us things like, 'Let's catch up offline, later'. Thus, striving to dismantle an emic perspective of our participants' relationship with digital technologies appears to be antithetical to the job anthropology is trying to do in the first place: understand the life worlds of others. I suspect, however, that the reason digital anthropologists pursue this battle is because one of the discipline's famous dictums, 'humanity is not one iota more mediated by the digital' (Horst & Miller, 2012, 3), situates the digital as the contemporary incarnation of a long continuum of mediating technologies, from religion and ritual to books and television, and as these *offline* artefacts are accepted as a technological-given, the digital should be equally experienced as the norm, unprivileged and non-exceptional. In *Chapter 7*, I will engage deeply with the emerging concept of 'post-digital' to consider the conflation of practice between digital activists and digital ethnographers. In this chapter, to accept the conflation of Twitter and Sri Lanka as both similarly dangerous 'places', I suggest we think through the concept I call 'The Digital IRL' in order to reconceptualise the notions of place and the ethnographic field site as something inherently heterogeneous; that is, multi-sited, hybrid and digitally mediated. The neologism 'The Digital IRL' may appear paradoxical but by colluding the distinction between the *digital* and the *IRL*, and assuming that digital media is a given in a world ubiquitously mediated through non digital and digital technologies, we can get closer to understanding the contemporary condition of how my participants viewed their experience of 'Sri Lankan Twitter'.

In addition to discussions on the analogical reasoning on display during the ethnographic encounter and the chapter's wider argument about The Digital IRL, I explore the technicalities of organising the video-based focus group in Sri Lanka. I acknowledge that it may appear unorthodox to opt for a video-based communications at a time when in-person collaboration was permitted following a relaxation of pandemic-restrictions. However, as situated in the monograph's opening chapter and my introduction to a new methodological approach, 'Augmented Ethnography', that corroborates digital, datafied and in-person modalities, I demonstrate that doing research via digital technologies is becoming increasingly preferential (whether for researcher or participants) following the fast-tracking normalisation of digitally mediated communication installed by the pandemic. As a result of this methodological innovation, I argue it is not only the ability to mix digital, datafied and in-situ approaches that comprise augmented ethnography. Rather, I suggest, it is the active practice of choosing an alternative research modality, because it offers new and nuanced ethnographic opportunities, that contributes to the rigorous potential of augmented ethnography.

The chapter is structured in five forthcoming sections. I start with a description of Hiri's bold conflation and how this was resisted by members of the focus group who did not share his concern of Twitter's lack of accountability under Elon Musk's ownership. In the second section, I move onto the ethnographic encounter with the vajra via Piyanka's revelation, and it will emerge that there is a link between the state politics and platform governance via disciplinary power. Then, via a deep discussion on the anthropology of analogy, in section four I account for how the distinction between magical and scientific analogies offer different epistemological readings of experience. I conclude by demonstrating how the chapter's exploration of political analogies allows us to

reconceptualise the ethnographic field site away from location-based understandings to arbitrary field events steered by glow flows.

6.2 | The conflation of place

I had invited one of Sri Lanka's foremost commentators on social media, Hiri, to a focus group I was hosting on video-conferencing tool, Zoom, as part of my ethnographic research. Titled, 'Musk's Twitter Takeover: What does this mean for activism in Sri Lanka?', the focus group was an essential, but kneejerk response to the news that was fundamentally changing the landscape of my informants' lives, the ethnographic 'field site' that I was actively participating in, and, perhaps, more expansively, how the world experiences, circulates and trusts information. In the preparation phone calls for the focus group, I had quickly come to learn that Hiri was a man who revelled in elaborate imagery and baroque language. Living up to this reputation, he began the focus group by speaking at length comparing the emerging 'Wild West' of Twitter, the social media platform acquired only weeks before for \$44 billion by the world's richest man, Elon Musk, to the authoritarian politics of the Rajapaksa regime who had led the Sri Lanka state to victory in their civil war against the LTTE in 2009, and to the edge of bankruptcy in 2022. According to Hiri, Musk's recent sacking of entire departments dedicated to cyber security and safety resembled the firebrand politics of the Rajapaksas because quality, decency and ethics had been jettisoned in favour of cronyism and corruption. Even for him, I thought, that is a striking analogy.

The marketing of the zoom-based focus group framed the discussion as an open conversation between me and Hiri, as the guest speaker, with a

roster of interested invitees selected through our own personal networks. The far-reaching effects of the breakneck changes that Musk was implementing through a toxic mix of ignorance, mismanagement and Silicon Valley 'Move Fast and Break Things' rhetoric was the topic *du jour* across legacy and new media, the world-over. It felt, therefore, critical that I fostered this conversation to focus on how Musk's stunning acquisition would affect my informants' lives, specifically, and Sri Lanka, more broadly, and my hope was that together, Hiri and I, could inspire a diverse conversation with the other guests. In the 'zoom room' were 8-15 individuals sprawling the intersection of activist interests in Sri Lanka, including a digital rights lawyer, a cybersecurity expert, a libertarian crypto enthusiast, and a handful of recognisable social media activists who were later to become some of my closest research informants. The exact number of guests on the call at any one point was in flux as some people arrived after the call had begun, and others 'dropped' off, as I learnt, is customary in video conference calls at scale in Sri Lanka.

The normalisation of video conferencing, both for personal and professional communications, was arguably one of the most notable technological proliferations incurred due to the restrictions enforced by the pandemic, as essential societal institutional practices, from school teaching to mental health therapy, went remote via digitally mediating technologies. The video conferencing tool, Zoom, was one of the major beneficiaries in this boom in video-based communications, becoming a household name, as its userbase and its profits grew from \$ 21 million in 2019 to an extraordinary \$ 671 million in 2020 (BBC, 2021). The zoomification of daily activities has outlasted pandemic restrictions and the reason video conferencing has established itself as a preferred method of communication in a variety of settings, but especially in a professional environment, is because it reduces travel, and therefore saves time and money. Reducing the need for carbon-heavy flights for international

communications also makes video conferencing, ostensibly at least, ecologically more conscientious.

In response to my opening question, 'What are the changes Musk is implementing in his first weeks in charge of Twitter?', Hiri was vitriolic, explaining to the activists on the video call that Twitter was no longer a safe place for anti-government politics. Referring directly to several of the activists by their nicknames, therefore developing a sense of commonality and camaraderie with them and their practices, Hiri argued that when the activists were organising the *Aragalaya* earlier this year that culminated in the ousting of President Gotabaya Rajapaska and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, their political office had been in regular communication with Twitter operatives, pressuring the platform to disable key activist-influencers and requesting data on their confidential information and geolocations. Under its previous public ownership, Twitter, would not entertain such illicit requests, especially given Sri Lanka's tumultuous recent past and human rights violations, but now Twitter is under control of Elon Musk, a careless egregious man, we cannot trust him to not hand over your personal data and put your lives at risk. To accentuate this point, Hiri claimed Musk was no different from the Rajapaksa clan. In full flow now, Hiri said, 'everything that has gone wrong with the [Sri Lankan] government departments and their approach to data security and privacy is now [at] Twitter. It's literally become a Third World entity overnight!'

I tried to encourage the crowd into the conversation after what I interpreted to be quite damning exclamations from the guest speaker. The cyber security expert came forward first and volunteered that he has deleted his Twitter DM's in response to Musk's takeover. He also added that he had previously believed that direct messages were unencrypted, so he never engaged in serious politics there anyway. The rest of the crowd were quiet. Perhaps, I thought, Hiri penchant for overly elaborate metaphors and

beguiling language was lost on some of the crowd but having chatted with several of the activists following the focus group, I learnt that many of them were not seriously worried about the potential harms of Elon's Musk's takeover. It was not that they did not understand Hiri's clamour to lay down tools on Twitter, rather, they questioned why would they worry about a man [Elon Musk] who was surely less dangerous than the Mahinda Rajapaksa and his regime? A government, we should not forget, who ordered the killing of tens of thousands of Tamils civilians in 2009. And, who, since 2016, had mobilised several anti-Muslim riots, had been implicated in 2019's Easter Sunday bombings against predominately Catholic people, and who, most recently, turned on their 'own', having arrested and beaten hundreds of Sinhala-Buddhist protestors during the *Aragalaya*? Moreover, I reflected, maybe Hiri's analogy that was made to provoke change, had made the activists care less. If Twitter's lack of accountability is now akin to Sri Lanka's despotic governance, then they probably feel right at home there.

Following Hiri's initial rant about Musk's ineptitude of running Twitter and how it was quickly becoming a dangerous place for all users, and especially activism under autocratic regimes, one guest, Sanjay, offered an opposing perspective. He questioned the idea that Twitter was suddenly running amok and being overseen by 'some rando', accurately pointing out that Musk's most successful products and brands, Tesla and SpaceX, are two of the most highly revered and financially valued corporations on the stock market, hence, why he *is* the richest man in the world, and how he can afford to buy a social media platform for \$44 billion! Moreover, Elon Musk is adored and trusted by thousands (more likely millions) of people worldwide, especially in USA but also in India, and these people do not share the opinions that Hiri has described. Bravely, Sanjay, with well-oiled crypto-libertarian spirit, suggested that Hiri's distrust of Musk's Twitter was in contestation with many people's trust and

adoration of Musk and therefore was not objectivity true. It was a well-measured tonic to the doctor's gin. It also helpfully reminded me how the deep polarisation of US politics, entrenched and normalised since the rise of Trump, is by extension, polarising communities worldwide as it is Silicon Valley's products and services that mediate our own relationship with each other and our localised politics (see Marwick, 2013).

6.3 | The conflation of men

One of the clearest benefits of the online focus group was that it acted as gateway to build trust with an ensemble cast of digital enthusiasts interested in the state of social media in Sri Lanka, enabling me to follow up with individual guests to organise casual 1-2-1 catchups and participant observation. The cyber security expert from the focus group, Piyanka, invited me to his office in a Colombo suburb above a cafe that he also owned. During the focus group, Piyanka had been the first to volunteer that he had deleted his Twitter DMs for security purposes in response to Musk's takeover, suggesting he agreed with Hiri's argument that Twitter under Musk was a compromised zone for activism. In private, however, it transpired that Piyanka was a surreptitious Musk supporter, and during our first meeting, Piyanka told me an extraordinary story.

'Did you see what Elon posted on Twitter the other day?' Piyanka asked enthusiastically, grinning at his desktop monitor, typing swiftly on his keyboard. I was the other side of the desk and eagerly craning my neck, trying to make sense of this seemingly big revelation before it arrived. I could see that he was scrolling through the image results of a Google search. Clicking on one image (See Figure 17), Piyanka now turned the screen towards me, pointed and exclaimed: 'Look! There!'

Scanning the screen, there I could see four open cans of Diet Coke and two rather large, intimidating firearms — you could say, a quintessential vision of *The American Dream*™.

I can probably guess that this is a man's bedside table, but I ask, to confirm, 'What am I looking at?'

'You are *not* looking', Piyanka insists, pointing to the bottom left corner of the screen. 'This is the vajra. This is from the gods, the world's most powerful weapon.'



Figure 17: Elon Musk's shared a photo of his bedside table. Amongst the opened cans of diet coke and two firearms, to Piyanka's astonishment is an ancient Buddhist relic, the vajra.

Only two days previously, and four days after the focus group, Elon Musk had shared an attention-grabbing photo on Twitter that had captivated Piyanka and dramatically elevated his opinion of Musk because it appeared that the world's richest man was in possession of a vajra, a holy

Buddhist ritual weapon. It is a familiar trope for social media lifestyle-influencers to broadcast 'live' from their bedrooms or other intimate settings, such as in-a-towel-straight from-the-shower, in order to display their authenticity and lay oneself bare, and by sharing with his 170+ million followers a snapshot of his bedside table, Elon Musk was engaging in the classic social media influencer tactic of visibility labour (Abidin, 2013; 2015). Whether by chance or clever self-branding, by sharing this photo that included the vajra, diminutive as it is overshadowed by the firearms in the photograph, Musk had triggered something extraordinary amongst South Asian and Southeast Asian communities and their diasporas, and especially Buddhists, familiar with the small relic. The vajra, Piyanka explained, is a small ritual weapon from ancient Buddhist lore. He imagined it had gone unnoticed by the millions who had viewed the photo, but Piyanka had instantly recognised the relic for its considerable, if esoteric, meaning to Buddhists.

As I'm staring at the screen in disbelief, I'm rolling my head in typical Sri Lanka fashion. The head roll has a plethora of use cases and variety of meanings, but right now, I am saying to Piyanka, 'Tell me more, this is unbelievable!'

There's an air of mischief to Piyanka's smile now and he opens a new tab on the web browser. Whilst he's typing, he is also talking: 'We Sri Lankans know about the vajra because Mahinda [Rajapaksa] is always holding...' He hits the 'Return' key with confidence and again cries, 'There!'.

'Ohhhhhh!!', I grasp.

On the screen is Mahinda Rajapaksa (See Figure 18), the ex-Sri Lankan president (2005-2015) and prime minister (2019-2022). In archetypal celebrity pose, he's waving to the camera as he gets into a car with a large

crowd swelling around him. In his right hand he is clutching, and quite conspicuously displaying, a small, gold, vajra.



Figure 18: Infamous Sri Lanka president and prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, regularly displays his vajra in hand. The relic has profound meaning across Buddhist cosmologies, implying the holder is 'the powerful one'.

My mind was spinning. Why does Elon Musk, alongside his bedside handguns and empty cans of *Diet Coke*, possess an ancient Buddhist weapon, closely associated with the Sri Lanka despotic politician, Mahinda Rajapaksa. *What on earth is going on here?*

Piyanka is very serious now. 'The vajra is powerful. It's centralises power. We call it's 'the god's power'. When you have that thing, you take the power.'

He pretends he is holding a vajra in his right hand. 'If I talk to you whilst holding, you get attracted to me because it's centralising the power'. I eye his hand and his make-believe vajra.

'The vajra is *sharp* [he winces to feign clutching something sharp]. It *activates*, it draws *power*, from *me*, from *you*, from *everyone*.' Every word is intense and seductive.

As a practicing Sinhala Buddhist, Piyanka's beliefs in vajra, astrology, power, and good and evil gods are profound and enlightening. I do not know if he was a political supporter of Mahinda Rajapaska—it would have been inappropriate to ask—but we do know the majority of Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka *did* vote for the Rajapaksa in 2019 following the Easter Sunday Attacks that had emotionally devastated the country and plunged its ethnic groups into a state of fear and loathing. What was abundantly clear was that Piyanka's respect for Elon Musk had grown significantly since his recent vajra revelation. 'I am surprised *he* is believing in these sorts of things', he smiled.

From an etic western perspective, merely sharing a photograph of the holy relic does not confirm that Musk is a practicing Buddhist or believing in the ritual power of the vajra, especially as Musk's has made no public statements suggesting this. But belief and materiality have a special bond in Buddhism and possession of an object can be assumed to elicit its power. In George Tanabe's (2012) thorough examination of the forms and functions of the Buddhist rosary, the possession of sacred beads is a demonstration of one's faith. Critics may suggest that holding a rosary and not knowing it's true meaning or not knowing the correct chants may appear to be 'bad Buddhism' and could create bad karma, but this is based on a Western, ethnocentric understanding of religion and belief (ibid). If we follow this understanding of how possession of a Buddhist artefact provides affinity to its meaning through materiality alone, then Piyanka's uncritical reverence for Musk is more comprehensible. Piyanka continued by talking about Musk's then-ongoing, highly publicised conflict with the technology manufacturer, Apple. Apple were threatening to not list Twitter

on their App Store following Musk's gun hoe acquisition of the social media platform, so Musk had gone directly to Apple HQ in Silicon Valley and has since 'neutralised' the problem so that Twitter is freely available on Apple App Store. For Piyanka, this swift resolution of a serious problem for the business mogul demonstrated his ability to negotiate, manage difficult situations and come out on top, presumably empowered somehow by the vajra. When he said, 'Holding the vajra means he's a power grabber', before adding, 'He is a dictator... He knows how to run the game', I was left confused. Are you talking about Musk or Rajapaksa, I asked? His commentary on one man could easily be interpreted as a description of the other.

Whilst Piyanka's high regard for the world's richest man was visible, I was left wondering about the striking coincidence of Mahinda Rajapaksa famously holding the vajra in demonstrations of public office, and Elon Musk sudden revelation of his own vajra possession (alongside his collection of guns). I was also bemused by how Hiri had only days earlier made a seemingly flippant and provocative conflation between Twitter's newly founded 'third world' status, and Sri Lanka, a country besieged by internal conflict and on the cusp of bankruptcy.

6.4 | The State of Social Media

To proceed from these ethnographic descriptions, the second half of the chapter is split into three corresponding sections. First, I situate Hiri's bold conflation of Sri Lanka and Twitter in Jonathan' Spencer's work on the anthropology of the state to consider how both the nation state and social media platforms orchestrate Foucauldian regimes of disciplinary power. Then, in **the conversation in the anthropology's intrinsic relationship with**

analogy and the work of Stanley Tambiah, I examine Piyanka's regard for Elon Musk and Mahinda Rajapaksa through their material connection to the vajra's Buddhist mysticism. Finally, I discuss the implications of the analogies made in my ethnographic descriptions and how they potentially address debates about the fixity and relevance of the field site in contemporary ethnographic processes. Pre-empting that some readers may think it is significant leap to seek a theoretical link between one research participant's wordplay and a re-evaluation of the ethnographic field site, or another research participant's admiration for an infamous billionaire being seemingly built on his possession of a sacred artefact, I take inspiration from eminent digital anthropologist, Nick Seaver. In the previous chapter I discussed the excellent analysis Seaver makes of the 'hooking' analogy repeatedly made by software developers to describe how they design platform algorithms by engaging in the strikingly different literature on the anthropology of animal traps. To qualify his seemingly conceptual leap from cutting-edge algorithms to primitive animal traps, Seaver subscribes to 'the anthropologist's prerogative to take our interlocutors more literally and more figuratively than they take themselves' in order to 'pursue here the consequences of this comparison' (2017, 3). Following Seaver, I use analogical reasoning as a springboard to consider the implications for digital anthropology's disciplinary trope of the online/offline construct. Assuredly, when Hiri made his powerful (or was it flippant?) analogy between Sri Lanka and Twitter, I am almost certain he was not suggesting that the online world and the offline world were not distinct. However, by leaning into the mysticism of the vajra, we learn that analogy offers a powerful epistemology for articulating how social media content is interpreted and, how thinking through the anthropology of analogy gives purchase to vexing questions about the relationship between technology, culture and power.

Thus, to return to Hiri's original conflation that Sri Lanka and Twitter are both analogous insofar as they are 'third world countries' led by authoritative strongmen and how nation state and platform operate without insufficient checks and balances for users and citizens to remain safe from harm, let me consider the analogy both *literally* and *figuratively*. **In literal terms**, given the enormous scale and userbase of the leading social media platforms and how they swamp the GDP and populations of many countries, the notion that a social media platform could resemble a nation state is not so far-fetched. In 2022, the userbase of largest social media platform, Facebook, exceeded 2.5 billion users; the population size of world's two largest countries, India and China, combined. Similarly, in financial terms, Amazon, which is far bigger and greater than its shopping website persona is wealthier than 92% of countries globally combined (Dughi, 2021). More figuratively, economist, Yanis Varoufakis, has said we are entering an era of 'techno-feudalism', as the gigantic spoils of capitalism are increasingly only shared by five elite technology companies; often euphemised as Big Tech, they are Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta (Facebook) and Microsoft. Perhaps most tellingly, even Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, has made the analogy between nation state and social media platform. In 2018, he said, 'In a lot of ways Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company. We have this large community of people, and more than other technology companies we're really setting policies' (cited in Farrell, Levi & O'Reilly, 2018). Evidently, platforms colossal userbases and enormous financial resources suggest they may be considered quasi-nation states with their own polities, cultures and practices, but should we not consider *what is a nation-state* in the first instance?

Helpfully, the thrust of Jonathan Spencer's book, *Anthropology, Politics and the State* (Spencer, 2007), takes on this question, and several other issues too, including the return of the 'political' to anthropology following

years on the fringes of ethnographic writing. In the *Introduction* this monograph, I established Spencer's work as highly influential because he helped reinstate the anthropological interest in the political after years on the fringes of ethnographic writing. By drawing on his first book, a classic village ethnography (Spencer, 1990), Spencer advocates for a radical departure from the apolitical anthropology that had become fashionable, arguing that the 'political' is found in the microdetails of the everyday, and how even the smallest, most innocuous incidents can be found to reproduce and reinforce larger political processes of building and reinforcing the state. Spencer's case example of simmering tensions in a Sinhala village election that explodes into a moment of violence when a drunken member of the opposition delegation attacked a government official and threatens to have the man moved to a Tamil-dominated village when they come to power, is especially evocative for anyone who has spent significant time in Sri Lanka, because of the anxiety and uncertainty that is palpable at times of political importance.

What emerges from Spencer's overview of the anthropology's engagement with the state is an interesting critic of Michel Foucault's influence on wider anthropological thinking. While Spencer respects the broad and far-reaching importance of Foucault work on the discipline, Spencer suspects some of his ideas on governmentality and its relationship with the state and society have hindered anthropology's ability to identify and conceive the nation state in the lives of our participants. In chapter five of his exemplary book, *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), Foucault outlines the quixotic model of the prison system and the regimes of disciplinary power this administers through an imagined all-seeing eye. But for Spencer, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon is an ideal; a blueprint of disciplinary excellence, but it was never built or put into practice, and herein lies the issue with Foucault's analysis. Foucault writes as if the panopticon *is* the practice of prison the system and therefore intrinsically

encapsulates how state apparatus condition habits and behaviours in citizens. Quite critically, Spencer argues that this ideological perspective has had methodological failings for how anthropologists see the world, writing, 'The world of anthropology in the Foucauldian mould is a very predictable world, a feel-good dystopia, where external power meets local culture resistance, and the last surviving remnants of Foucault's bracing capacity to shock is drowned in a sea of sentimentality' (2007, 111).

At the crux of Spencer's critique of Foucault's influence on how anthropologists conceive of the state in the lives of their participants is what he calls a 'retreat to the textual' (ibid) that misreads the state as merely theoretical, rather than its performative reality. Through a case example of the Indian border crossing with Pakistan where the state is most visible, Spencer argues that the idea that the states strictly functions as a disciplinary instrument is fallacious because the sight of refugees illegally crossing state lines defies the disciplinary apparatus of state power. I paraphrase, but Spencer essentially argues that statecraft is better seen as performative because then we can understand the dissonance and acts of resistance as the causality of disciplinary power. In conclusion, Spencer argues that the due to its focus on the everyday and the miniate of how the state is enforced and resisted, anthropology is in a privileged position to grapple with how states are continuously reproduced, and how small acts of inclusion/exclusion and resistance are performed by its subjects.

Following Spencer's emphasis on the everyday processes of building and resisting statecraft, there were numerous occasions during my fieldwork when I noted how social anxieties seemed to ram up and the ostensible peace of the status quo felt fragile around times of the political importance. One example relates directly to the ethnographic description in the previous chapter when I was conducting participant observation

with Siri by helping her film a video on her green social work at Independence Square in central Colombo. In the chapter, I commented that we had not anticipated Sri Lankan soldiers erecting scaffolding for the forthcoming Independence Day celebrations and their menacing presence was making me feel uneasy at the site. The week before my meeting with Siri, I had noticed an increased presence of heavily armed soldiers in central Colombo, and I had sent an innocuous tweet on Twitter, asking *what is happening?* admitting that I find the army presence on the street intimidating. By then, 15 months into my fieldwork, I had a fairly sizable and active Sri Lankan following on Twitter. Many liberal Sri Lankans commented, lamenting the over militarisation of the Independence Day celebrations, but a handful of commentators reproached me, saying the army's job is intimidate and what should I expect from a country that has had to fight off fearsome terrorists. I should add that this seemingly idle tweet practically went viral, and I felt very uneasy with its 'success'. I did not enjoy becoming the centre of a Twitter storm about the value and overreach of the Sri Lankan armed forces!

Moving to a figurative analysis, how may an anthropology of the state helpfully apply to social media? The extraordinary consolidation of power that platforms have incurred is being scholarly examined under the term, 'platform governance'; defined as 'a set of legal, political, and economic relationships structuring interactions between users, technology companies, governments, and other key stakeholders in the platform ecosystem'. (Gorwa, 2019b) I suggest that this vague definition of platform governance is most helpfully envisaged through content moderation. Content moderation is the practices, processes and policies that determine what content, speech and behaviours are allowed on a platform and what content and users are removed or banned, either by automated systems or human-moderators. More specifically, Gillespie defines content moderation as 'the detection of, assessment of, and interventions

taken on content or behaviour deemed unacceptable by platforms or other information intermediaries, including the rules they impose, the human labour and technologies required, and the institutional mechanisms of adjudication, enforcement, and appeal that support it'. (Gillespie, 2020)

The importance of content moderation to the safety and quality of the platform experience cannot be overstated. Content moderation is complex because it has to serve the needs of all the stakeholders in the busy platform ecosystem, including the users, advertisers, state and statutory regulators, plus the platform's own objective of retaining users and profit extraction through the aggregation of data. Gillespie (2018) claims that content moderation is a platform's de facto intellectual property (IP) and most explicit profitable commodity, because if a platform's content moderation system does not sufficiently remove offensive speech or filter unstimulating content then users would disengage, and the advertising business model would flounder. I contend that the terms and practices of how a platform organises content moderation is how it governs its users' experiences and I therefore suggest content moderation is an entry point for an ethnographic approach to platform governance.

In 2014, an early signal of social media's platform's cultural shift to governance saw Facebook update their content moderation systems for a proportion of targeted users. The experiment, which has gathered widespread notoriety of its lack of self-awareness and ethical principles, saw a predetermined cohort of over 300,000 Facebook users be served content deemed 'negative' by its algorithmically operated moderation system. Supposedly, Facebook were interested to observe whether negative content has a psychological effect on users and whether the causation of this was to encourage the users to post negative content. Known as 'emotional contagion' (Kramer et al. 2014), The popular backlash was, unsurprisingly, vitriolic, and criticism accused Facebook of

compromising the emotional wellbeing of their user base in their quest to better understand the cause and effect of content production, and, presumably, how users respond to advertising with profitable behaviours. In the book *Automated Media*, Mark Andrejevic (2019) argues platforms have moved on from the Foucauldian disciplinary control where surveillance beguiles users into preferred behaviours and onto what he calls 'operational control'. Disciplinary control is built on the software design behaviourist paradigm that insists, 'companies that want to acquire users need to inculcate habits in them' (Andrejevic, 2019, 3). Operational control, on the other hand, does not seek to 'enforce behavioural norms, but to unleash the full range of activity that will allow patterns to emerge as clearly as possible in order to correlate, predict, and pre-empt' (Andrejevic, 2019, 40). Disciplinary control may remain an unintended consequence, or *affordance*, of operational control, but the contemporary principle of how platforms operate is to *only* build the environment (the UI/UX) for social interaction and then allow users 'freedom to express' and act without obvious restrictions. Referring back to *Chapter 5*, the *platform affordance* of this shift from disciplinary control to operational control is highly personalised and idiosyncratic behaviours from users thereby creating more precise data points for profit-seeking stakeholders.

While there does appear to be an intrinsic link between platform governance and content moderation systems, and how a nation state such as a Sri Lanka governs, I am unconvinced by the efficacy of Hiri's analogy without further examination of the role of analogy in ethnography. In *Chapter 2*, I wrote about the Sri Lankan state's oppressive relationship with media freedoms and how access to social media has been forcefully and repeatedly curtailed in times of crisis and violence. In addition, the relationship between statecraft's disciplinary power and the platform affordances of content moderation is seemingly analogous as platforms and states both appear to govern under the proviso of citizen/user well-

being but there are clandestine processes at work designed to create docile bodies (presumably for profitable extraction procedures). But drawing literal and figurative comparisons between the draconian measures of the state and the coercive functions of platform affordances does not seem to get to the heart of the matter. Indeed, as we will see, a deep critique of what analogical reasonings entails will shed light on the special role analogy can potentially play in ethnographic analysis. When Hiri declared that Sri Lanka and Twitter were one and same he was not intentionality referring to a taxonym of governance, but he was drawing on a vernacular typology that is a defining part of how we all communicate; an equally vague and common-sense understanding that is informed by a deep reliance on emphasis and imagery for everyday articulation. Arguably, a surface-reading of Hiri's analogy, following Spencer's reimagining of the political in the lived worlds of our participants, was simply that nation states are inherently political, and so too are social media platforms.

6.5 The Anthropology of Analogy

Analogy has a long history in the anthropological imagination and may well be considered one of its foundational tenets for 'analogy shapes any concept in anthropology' (Jones, 2017, 25). Historically, indigenous cultural phenomena such as the potlatch or sorcery have had to have been analogically addressed so anthropologists can find a comparative footing when they discuss cultural practices that are ostensibly inconsistent or incompatible with their Western perspective. Separate to this, Edward Burnett Tylor, the first chair of anthropology at Oxford University and one of the forefathers of the discipline, wrote at length on the role of analogy in how societies construct relationship with the unknown. He saw indigenous *magic* as the primitive other to modern *science* and societies

that deal in magic will inevitably progress to science. To make his antiquated point he wrote:

'In the earlier days of knowledge men relied far more than we moderns do on reasoning by analogy or mere association of ideas. In getting on from what is known already to something new, analogy or reasoning by resemblance always was, as it still is, the mind's natural guide in the quest of truth. Only its results must be put under the control of experience. [In] matters beyond his limited knowledge, [the rude man] contents himself with working on resemblances or analogies of thought, which thus become the foundation of magic. (Tylor 1881: 338–39; also cited in Jones, 2017)'

More recently, in a somewhat dense article, Sri Lankan anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah (2017) demonstrated how the notion that analogical reasoning as a pre-modern or unscientific mode of communication is erroneous insofar as analogies are not only persistent but emblematic of how information is conveyed in all societies, especially scientific communities. While the essay does not deal with Tylor's ethnocentrism directly, Tambiah does provide a pointed critique of the prevalence of analogy in early ethnographic writing, specifically Evan-Pritchard's highly revered study on witchcraft among the Azande. Analogical reasoning is a virtue of both magic *and* science, but Tambiah claims they involve different genres of analogy. Science, a normatively western knowledge base pertaining to literate societies, makes an analogy between known causal relationships and unknown causal relationships. 'The heart is a like a pump', writes Tambiah to demonstrate how a scientific analogy relies on the audience's comprehension of how a known entity (the pump) functions to then find comparative meaning in the non-known entity (we can reason

that the heart in terms of its biologically workings is unknown). *Magic*, on the other hand, the typology of analogy normatively prescribed for pre-literate societies, relies on the broadly different use of a particular kind of analogy, emphasising the transference of meaning from the physical into the abstract. Historic ethnographical descriptions are teeming with these kinds of magical analogies made by individuals in pre-literate descriptions. Once again, I refer to Tylor, who writes:

‘The north American Indian, eager to kill a bear tomorrow, will hang up a rude grass image of one and shoot it, reckoning that this symbolic act will make the real one happen. The Australians at a burial, to know in what direction they may find the wicked sorcerer who has killed their friend, will take as their omen the direction of the flames of the grave-fire. The Zulu who wants to buy cattle may be seen chewing a bit of food in order to soften the hard heart of the seller he is dealing with’. (Tylor 1881: 340)

The main contention of Tambiah’s essay is to demonstrate the analytical limitations of contrasting magical analogical reasoning to the typology of western, scientific modes of analogy. My own theoretical concern with the anthropology of analogy is to consider the different typologies of analogy and query their efficacy in relation to my own ethnographic descriptions above. I would like to question; what genre of analogy is Hiri’s claim that Sri Lanka and Twitter are both third world entities? And is Piyanka’s reverence for the Elon Musk’s vajra a vivid example of magical analogy in practice?

Before addressing these important questions, I would like to consider another persistent analogy in the national discourse of Sri Lanka. Rhetoric

promoting Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka has a proclivity to conflate the purity and longevity of Buddhism with the safekeeping of Sri Lanka nation state and its sovereignty. Egregious abuses conducted by the Sri Lankan state on its own people during the long 26 civil war, and especially during the final months of the war in 2009, have been interpreted as a victory amongst the broader Sri Lankan public because acts of violence by the Sri Lanka state against terrorists and dissidents had been long programmed as acts of the protection of the sanctity of Buddhism (see Holt (eds), 2016). Some twenty years previously, anthropologist Bruce Kapferer summarised the analogical effect of this programming with a useful analogy of his own. He wrote, 'an attack on Sinhalese is an attack on the state, and an attack on the organs or apparatuses of the state is an attack on the person' (Kapferer, 1988, 100), helping us understand how the Sri Lankan state rationalised its war on the LTTE as a dual defensive of the Sri Lankan state and the Sinhalese people. In other words, by administering kills against Tamil insurgents (and civilians), the state is protecting itself, the natural custodian of Sinhala-Buddhism. Interestingly, how the Sinhalese body is deeply entangled with the Sri Lanka state is explored in an adjacent body of work on the Buddhist relationship with bioethics in organ donation. Anthropologist Bob Simpson (2004) argues that donating eyes and blood is an exceptionally common in Sri Lanka compared to most other countries because it is ritually linked to intrinsic Buddhist practice of gift-giving and the spiritual pursuit of bodily detachment. The phenomenon of organ donation, however, is not assiduously practiced in Sri Lanka by Sri Lankan Hindus, Muslims or Christians, only Sinhala-Buddhists. The act of gifting bodily materiality to the state-funded national health service for utility amongst the wider public, is a practice that reaffirms the inseparable relationship between the bloodline of the Sinhalese people and strength of the Sri Lankan state.

In the post-war years since 2009, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has continued to proliferate, and its popularity is regularly attributed to the rise of social media and the role social media has in disseminating hateful speech and information designed to mislead. For example, in *Chapter 2*, I introduced the incendiary moment in 2018 when a fake news video of a Muslim restaurant owner confessing to poisoning his Sinhala patrons went viral on social media and provoked a series of violent anti-Muslim riots. The narrative fed into a building conspiracy theory that accused Muslims of trying to 'Sterilise the Sinhalese'. Farfetched allegations on social media had previously accused a Muslim-owned shop of giving away toffees designed to sterilise Sinhalese customers. Another Facebook post from a Sinhala woman claimed to have found 'tiny gel blobs in the padding' of a bra she bought from a Muslim clothes store, presumably to sterilize her mammary glands (Rajagopalan & Nazim, 2018, para 40). Outlandish and bizarre as these accusations may be, they have been framed in wider scholarly and popular debates on the dangers of unbridled digital communications and how social media is a vehicle for disinformation (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2021; Frydenlund, 2019). I am led to suggest that it may be useful to depart from the popular discourse about the relationship between disinformation and social media and consider how analogical reasoning may be an integral element for the belief in seemingly dangerous or unproven points of views.

How does the xenophobic rhetoric around Muslim's trying to 'sterilise the Sinhalese' correlate to Tambiah's distinction between scientific and magical reasoning? Perhaps it should be first noted that from a strictly biomedical point of view (i.e. scientific), the various accusations of Muslims in Sri Lanka trying to sterilise their Sinhalese countryman are factually untrue insofar as there are no known substances that can wilfully sterilise a man or a woman (refs). Moreover, one glance at another of Stanley Tambiah's works (1996), a colossal overview of anti-Muslim riots

in Sri Lanka beginning in 1913, clearly illustrates that tensions between the Sinhala majority and Sri Lanka's third-sized minority group are based on generational entanglements relating to all manner of factors, especially economics and access to resources, not social media. Historically, Sinhala-Buddhists have clashed with Muslim 'Moors', known for their mercantile expertise, have a habit of continuing business practices on Buddhist holy days (i.e. full moon 'Poya's'), thereby disrespecting the sanctity of Buddhist belief, but also monopolising markets. Evidently, then, popular, government and scholarly accounts that blame social media for anti-Muslim riots appear to systematically overlook generations of tensions and violence between Sinhala Buddhists and Muslims that has gone before which have been motivated by cultural differences, belief and access to resources. However, by following Tambiah's essay on the anthropology of analogy, I argue that analogical reasoning may also be instrumental in how we understand how untruths such as the sterilisation saga not only persist but proliferate.

Above, I introduced Tanabe's (2012) deep examination of the metaphysics of the Buddhist rosary and how materiality is key to how knowledge and belief is disseminated in Buddhist cosmology. In Buddhism, the materiality of a thing equates to its spiritual value and possession of that thing grants the beholder its spiritual energy. Thus, if we apply Tambiah's analogical typology to Tanabe's materiality, it is not unsurprising that the sterilisation narrative becomes tangible through a magical, or unscientific, relationship with material things. In the Sinhala Buddhist conspiracy theory against Muslims, toffees, gels, powders and food act as material vehicles for the transmission of a lethal poison. Interestingly, the *magic* of the sterilisation analogy also appears to vocalise the analogy made by Kapferer and Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism narrative that conflates the purity of Buddhism with the body of the Sinhalese people and the protection of nation of Sri Lanka. It would not be a misstep to rephrase Kapferer powerful

analogy to read, 'to poison a Sinhala body is to poison state, and a poisoning of the organs or apparatuses of the state is a poisoning of the person'.

In this chapter's ethnographic descriptions involving Hiri and Piyanka, connecting the nation state of Sri Lanka and social media platform of Twitter is the power of the vajra and its materialisation under ownership of both the ousted-incumbent leader of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the CEO and owner of Twitter, Elon Musk. Mythologically, the vajra is understood to be a weapon of unparalleled power akin to the lightning bolt of Zeus in ancient Greek mythology, or Thor, the most prominent god in Germanic paganism. In Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies, the vajra is a weapon wielded by the wrathful deity Vajrapani and Indian Vedic god, Indra, 'king of the heavens'. Despite its formidable potential for enemies, the vajra is also associated with compassion and achieving the ubiquitous state of enlightenment for the possessor. When I first learned via Piyanka's computer screen that Elon Musk was in possession of the vajra, I was incredulous, but considering its place in the wider context of Silicon Valley 'tech bro' culture may shed some light on what appears to be an unexpected and incongruous clash of cultures. At first, I was asking myself, what is Musk doing with this most potent weapon of Buddhist lore, and does he have any idea to its meaning to millions of people, mainly Buddhists and Hindus, around the world? In the mid-1990s and the advent of the dotcom boom, an often-cited essay called *The California Ideology* summed up the implicit values that Silicon Valley, and what has become the epicentre for global internet production, has been built on (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995). According to the authors, the neoliberal logic of Silicon Valley 'combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies' (ibid. 1) to create a confusing cultural cocktail that mixes the hip 'West Coast' countercultures such as surfing and psychedelics with *laisse faire* capitalism embodied by the nineteenth

century Californian gold rush. Is it any wonder that this vampiric spirit, which undoubtably includes a deeply orientalist gaze, embodied by a fascination with yoga, meditation and other Eastern esotericisms, has materialised in in the form of the vajra on Elon Musk's bedside table, alongside his firearms and empty cans of *Diet Coke*? In the midpoint of this chapter, I anticipated that readers may feel it is a difficult to critically examine Musk's possession of the vajra without any primary or secondary evidence from the man himself. However, through magical analogical reasoning I can content that it is not so much a question as to whether Musk believes in the power of the vajra, whether he is deliberating exploiting it or not, or if it is just a meaningless plaything to him. Rather, what is compelling about the ethnographic case example is how ardent Buddhists such as Piyanka believe in the vajra's power and therefore are willing to commit reverence onto Musk for merely possessing it by the magical transference of physical meaning into the abstract. My reading of Piyanka perspective is that Musk's position as the world's richest man, owner of Twitter, and one of the most powerful people on the planet, appears to validate Musk's ownership of the vajra. Whether the vajra is an intrinsic cause or effect for Musk's extraordinary wealth and power is irrelevant.

In two of the other analogies under discussion, Hiri's bold claim that Twitter is a third world entity, and, therefore, like Sri Lanka, it is riddled with corruption and a general lack of accountability, and Kapferer's assertions that the Sri Lanka state and the Singhalese body are analogous since an attack on one is an attack on the other, the speakers rely on a scientific deployment of analogy. In both cases, the analogies rely on a causal relationship between what is known, for example, the poor socio-political situation in Sri Lanka and its modern history of political contestation and violence, and what is unknown, in this case, the black box inner workings of Twitter, to make a compelling conflation. In the case of the vajra, the

analogical reasoning pertains to its relationship with magic. Ethnographically, magical analogies oftentimes imbue objects with meaning or power, especially materials derived from the natural world. The vajra is said to represent and reproduce two of most formidable material phenomena in the natural world: the power of a thunderbolt and the strength of a diamond. Piyanka's belief in the powers of the vajra and its intrinsic connections to the formidable forces of nature are presupposed onto Rajapaksa, a man who has been omnipresent in the life of Piyanka as a leading political figure. Piyanka's also places this mode of reverence onto Musk, a man distant from Piyanka in many ways, but the magic imbued through the belief in vajra transverses time and space, culture and place.

6.6 | Towards a field site of arbitrary events

The two typologies of analogical reasoning implied by Hiri in the zoom focus group and later in conversation with Piyanka has forced me to confront the implications of a conflated on/offline world and what this means for the notion of the ethnographic field site. In an ever-increasingly globalised world, various sites, some more visible than others, constitute a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995). In my case, the nation state of Sri Lanka and the platform of Twitter are the most conspicuous 'places' of my research, but they are both big and nebulous entities and they are difficult to precisely define, let alone study. Moreover, one is a physical island off the tip of the Indian Subcontinent, situated in and of the world, the other is 'the ultimate non-place of super modernity' (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, page; also, Auge, 2009). Regardless of their conspicuous differences, the anthropological imagination may allow us to consider these two 'places' to share more commonalities than first

expected. For example, Spencer (2014) claims that the nation state of Sri Lanka has never been *only* an island that is clearly demarcated thanks to its geology as a standalone landmass in the Indian Ocean. Rather, Sri Lanka should be more accurately conceived as a 'colander' that people, things and ideas slip and travel through, building a collective imaginary that includes its historic and contemporary international diasporas whom all constitute the lived history of the place that is not fixed to a specific landmark but realised through experience and memory. Not dissimilarly, when considering *what is Twitter?* in relation to what components actually constitutes a social media platform as an anthropological site of interest, digital anthropologists have made the case that Twitter 'is actually the tweets, core genres, the regional differences and it's social and emotional consequences for users...It is the *content* rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matters' (Miller et al, 2016, 1). What these two examples suggest is, whilst remaining dramatically different, both Sri Lanka and Twitter as research subjects are equally ambiguous, emergent and evolving imaginaries.

The task of the *Chapter 3* was to bring into sharper focus the people of my study and introduce the cohort of 'information influencers' as a new conceptualisation of activist/influencer in Sri Lanka. While not central participants in my research, the unexpected arrival of public figures, Elon Musk and Mahinda Rajapaksa, first through Hiripitiya's analogy and, second through the metaphysics of the vajra, points to how my two field sites are porous, like Spencer's evocation of the 'colander', to the continuously global flow of things—people, objects, ideas et al—in a highly-globalised, interconnected world (Appadurai, 1990). Moreover, the co-occurrence of digital flows into an IRL field sites such as Elon Musk's vajra into Piyanka and I's conversation via his computer screen which still mediated our IRL interaction), and vice versa, appear to critique and add complexity to the highly influential works of Marcus and Appadurai. I

suspect that we can all agree with their arguments against the traditions of the bounded 'single' field site, but my ethnographic experiences appear to lay the foundations for a re-imagining what constitutes a field site in a deeply digitally mediated milieu.

In 2007, Matei Candea wrote a critique of the unfolding multi-sited field site zeitgeist. His article, '*Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-Site*', was not a nostalgic call for a return to the village ethnography that the foundations of social anthropology had been built upon; rather, the author contends that every field site, no matter how small or seemingly localised, is intrinsically multi-sited, and therefore the fabled notion of a 'village' or 'island' ethnography has always been misconceived and problematic. Through his own 'village ethnography' in a small settlement on the Mediterranean island of Corsica, Candea demonstrates that the challenge he faced whilst in the field was not embracing the notion of a multisided ethnographic approach; rather, he struggled to determine the precise places and practices of his study because his small village field site was so rich with diverse avenues of inquiry. To emphasis the point, Candea offers a series of rhetorical questions he faced whilst deciding what to focus on in the field:

'Should I go to the sheepshearing or accept an invitation to meet my neighbours' family? 'Do' participant observation in a bilingual classroom, or follow the teachers to a training course on the other side of the island? 'Hang out' in the village centre, surf the weblogs and forums dedicated to Corsican nationalism, or go and peruse the village or regional archives - or perhaps the national ones in Paris? Go for dinner with a neighbour, stay in the bar, or go out clubbing in a nearby town with co-workers? Fieldwork involved constant choices, and

there was often no good reason to prioritise one over the other' (Candea, 2007, 173-74)

I suspect that Candea's inventory of opportunities, and his equal hesitancy and indecision, will be familiar to many ethnographers who are presented with *constant choices*, but who cannot find a *good reason to prioritise one over the other*. For example, in my study, I was regularly torn between spending time on Twitter, the primary site of my research, or other social media platforms, which information influencers in Sri Lanka invariably also used. I would also not know what to decide when Nala would offer to meet at her home with her husband's home cooking or in the city centre for a bite to eat straight from the office. Even the simplest tasks became long debates in my head: should I call Bosco when I found out he had been hacked, text him, or comment under his latest post on Instagram (refer back to *Chapter 4* for what decision I took to mixed results!). From this chapter's ethnographical description, when I was organising the video-based focus group, I had a nagging suspicion that this was not *very* ethnographic at all and was left questioning whether what I was doing was *even* anthropology.

In an attempt to distil the multiple compound elements that constitute the parameters of a study, Candea suggests rather than emphasising the multi-sited-ness of fieldwork, we consider what he calls 'Arbitrary Locations'. Ethnographic field sites have always been arbitrarily drawn via an ongoing process between the researcher, participants, the object of study, and a raft of other factors, largely outside of the researcher's control. To substantiate his argument, Candea provides the evocative example of the archaeologist digging up an arbitrary location determined by the discovery of an artefact of great interest. The discovery, seldom found fossilising in the ground alone, is likely to represent the beginning of a larger network of relics and other curiosities related to archaeological

make-up of the land. But the archaeologist may not be able to excavate all the corresponding areas of interest as she would like due a variety of structural factors: a natural reserve, graveyard or motorway may all well be inhibiting the researcher's work. Therefore, the archaeology study, despite its potential for literally unearthing a rich tapestry of history and meaning, is arbitrarily bounded and determined since the research coexists, and may be in opposition, to numerous structures determinants. Whilst the archaeologist analogy is quite extreme, it does a convincing job of articulating the idea that an ethnographer cannot study everything in a social milieu or their periphery. The ethnographic experience is made up of piecemeal decisions and demarcations, some precise and self-determined, others involuntary and structurally enforced, and it is this dialectical process that contributes to the ongoing (de/re) construction of 'the field'; a designation, Candea observes, that is difficult to discern until after the work is done.

I want to argue that by thinking through the analogies put forward by Hiri and Piyanka, I have found a valid and purposeful way of simultaneously demarcating the parameters of my study whilst encouraging me to explore novel aspects without a feeling of limiting the scope of my study or the opposite feelings that I'm taking on too much and therefore losing focus. My actual research happened 'in' coffees shops, homes and offices, but also 'on' private channels of communication such as WhatsApp and 'through' digitally mediated spaces as illustrated through the Zoom-based focus group above. I also spent a lot of time observing, posting and documenting interactions on Twitter. However, when I think more broadly about the defining moments of my fieldwork, three main events seem to have the most impact on the direction and tone of research. Medical anthropologists have called for the recognition of 'field events' to 'shift the focus from the field as something that is situated in geographic and social spaces ('site'), whether physical or digital/virtual (Marcus 1995; Hine 2000;

Pink et al. 2015), towards understanding the field as a collection of 'events' that are co-created within specific practices by ethnographers, their study participants, and ICTs' (Ahlin & Li, 2019, p). I would also like to argue for the incorporation of global flows into the synthesising of what sequence of field events constitute my study. Following Ahlin & Li, I acknowledge the zoom focus group as a field event, and the subsequent conversation with Piyanka and his office as a field event, but I believe it would be remiss not to situate Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter has a significant field event in my research and, in addition, the Aragalaya protests that ousted the Rajapaksa regime from power in Sri Lanka. Regardless that these two earth-moving occurrences happening outside of my physical presence (the first because it happened in Silicon Valley when I was in Sri Lanka and the second happening in Sri Lanka when I was in Helsinki), they metaphysically *happened* to my research participants and therefore shaped their lives and my subsequent understanding of their lived experiences.

By assimilating global flows into my reconceptualising of field events I am emphasising Canda's description of the arbitrariness of field setting parameters, but I am resisting his determination that fieldwork is somehow location-based. While Ahlin and Li's 'field events' correctly points to the collaboration between ethnographers, those being researched and the intermediary of digital technologies, Canda's notion of arbitrary locations also adds essential nuance because the parameters of the field site are also prone to structural constraints and challenges outside of the control of the researcher/researched nexus. As such, I observe how neither myself or my research participants could have controlled or predicated the Aragalaya or the Twitter acquisition, but both happened concurrently during the 18-month fieldwork period and continuing to evolve in the lived worlds of my research participants, I have actively chosen to incorporate the arbitrary into the accountable. I should

also not overlook another arbitrary field event that massively impacted my study: the COVID:19 pandemic. As I have described at the beginning of this chapter, I seriously doubt that I would have ever committed to a video-based focus group if it was not the pandemic installing an acceptance of video conference, not only as an appropriate method of communication, but almost a preferred mode of ethnography in certain circumstances. What I ultimately conclude is that it is the ethnographer's decision to synthesize arbitrary events into what constitutes *their* field work. In *Chapter 5*, I briefly discussed a controversial news story of a Sri Lankan national team cricket player being accused of rape in Australia. Despite the hubbub generated around the story for several weeks and months of my research period, I do not consider this to be field event of my study because I did not examine the case in detail, largely because it did not appear to affect my research participants or myself in any conspicuous way. However, to another researcher or to another group of research participants, this highly contestable topic may have become a significant field event.

This chapter has been presented under the monograph's titular neologism, 'The Digital IRL' because a deep examination of the ethnographic descriptions helped me think imaginatively about the notion of 'place' in a world that is heavily and ubiquitously mediated by global flows, wired by digital technologies. Having identified analogy as a pivot trope in the history of ethnography, noting how it draws distinctions between scientific and magical analogies, we might move beyond overlooking or deemphasising participants bold or senseless assertions and toward reconfiguring our way of understanding how and why different people relate to materiality, whether online or offline, differently. Analogies make ethnography go around, suspended in broader typologies of meaning and material, drawing together, in this instance, the wealth accumulation of Silicon Valley and the globalisation of Buddhism euphemised as Eastern mysticism. The Digital IRL may appear to be a

contradiction in terms, or perhaps even an antonym of an analogy, because it cojoins the two things that have been analogised, but one of my research's ultimate goals is to minimize the distinction between the online and offline so digital media is accepted as given in ethnography, the same way other meditating technologies are. To do that, we need to conceive a world that does not separate or favour experiences IRL over the digital, or vice versa, and in the following chapter I go deeper into The Digital IRL.

CHAPTER 7 The Digital IRL (ii): Activism, Ethnography and the Post- Digital Condition

7.1 | Introduction

When I began my study, the objective was to investigate the prevalence of digital activism in Sri Lanka, and I would try to understand the relationship between social media and digital activism. The research design made a not-unfair assumption about the relationship between digital technology and digital activism, that digital technology somehow affords digital activism and digital activism is operationalised by digital technology. By engaging in long-term fieldwork alongside what others have called 'digital activists', I quickly realised that this primary assumption shot-short as there was no consideration about what the real-world consequences of digital activism, and what non-digital activities do digital activists do to substantiate their digital activism. This chapter provides the panacea to this initial shortcoming by presenting an ethnography of digital and non-digital activities by information influencers in Sri Lanka and considers what some researchers have called, 'post-digital', a term, in its basic formulation used to describe the 'convergence between the analog and the digital, the biological and the informational' (Cramer, 2013). By deliberating the post-digital, I purposefully enter into a discussion about three of the key rubrics of my research that may be significantly reorientated by the sociotechnical shift from the digital to post-digital. In sum, I question the validity of the digital prefix to 1) the phenomenon of digital activism, 2) the methodological practice of digital ethnography, and 3) the theoretical framework of digital capital.

What does post-digital mean for the future of digital activism? Anthropologist, Gabrielle Coleman, argues that consideration of the post-digital condition can have far-reaching effects on how we formalise important social phenomenon such as digital activism. In *Chapter 4*, I explored Coleman's influential ethnography of the international hacker network, Anonymous, and one of the significant contributions of her research is how it shows digital activism to be equally rooted in digital networks and IRL practices and place. In 2019, Coleman concedes that whilst she has previously adopted the term 'digital activism' to describe the activities of resistance movements orchestrated through and with digital technologies, she believes the term is unhelpful analytically because it bunches together 'too many incomparable forms of activism that can be carried out online' (Coleman, 2019). For example, the shadowy practices of Anonymous and their technical methods of dossing government entities in order to destabilise municipal communications, as in the case of the Tunisian government during the Arab Spring, is distinctly different to the practice I observed of the information influencers in Sri Lanka. The people of my study's activism was based on the publishing and circulating quality information with the adoption of lifestyle influencer tactics to increase their visibility. Whilst both cohorts have had profound success in dismantling despotic government regimes and the causation of outcomes are comparable, the activities are consciously different. Thus, I agree with Coleman that the umbrella term digital activism does not account for the heterogeneity of the phenomenon. Moreover, the term digital activism inherently emphasises the digital, when a symbiotic relationship between the digital and non-digital activities is more accurate.

The concept of 'post-digital' is gaining in popularity across various disciplines, however, it remains slippery and difficult to defy. Cox (2014) claims the prefix 'post' is problematic because it is liberally applied to a raft of emergent phenomena without careful consideration about what this

implies. In *Chapter 2*'s overview on the prevalence of mis/disinformation in Sri Lanka, I critiqued the popular usage of the term 'post-truth'. Used to describe the hyper-proliferation of fake news since 2016, I argued that the term post-truth is problematic because it implies a truth era, an inconceivable idea in Sri Lanka given the ongoing chasm of facts and justice for the atrocities committed during the long civil war that ended in 2009. Nevertheless, I suspect that the prefix 'post' can have analytical value when applied with greater precision. For example, 'postcolonialism' is a valuable term because it is conceived not as 'a stage after colonialism, but rather its mutation into new power structures, less obvious but no less pervasive, which have a profound and lasting impact on languages and cultures, and most significantly continue to govern geopolitics and global production chains' (Cox, 2014). Equally, my view is that the post-digital does not imply a disinterest in the digital, or an acceptance that because digitalisation underwrites technical and social world functionality its importance dissolves in favour of *the next big thing*; rather, **post-digital can be conceptualised as a focussed appreciation of the asymmetrical power dynamics installed by the digitalisation of the everyday and it's lasting and ongoing entanglements on how infrastructures, markets, practices and politics unfold.**

This chapter and the previous one have been paired together under the monograph's titular 'The Digital IRL' characterisation because the ethnographic descriptions energise the monograph's primary contribution to dismantling the on/offline binary. In *Chapter 6*, I grappled with the seemingly bold conflation made by Dr Hiri that the Sri Lankan state and the social media platform of Twitter were analogous because they are both 'third world entities' ran by despotic leaders who have little care for the wellbeing of their populace, but are only hell bent on profit-accumulation and political power, leading me to argue towards the nuances of analogical reasoning when assessing the literal and figurative claims made by ethnographic research participants. To continue with the critique of the

online/offline dichotomy, in this chapter, I take the reader along the journey of Wasantha, the imprisoned leader of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), who was eventually released in February 2023, following a monumental collaborative effort by members of the Community Assembly, a new Sri Lanka political cooperative, and especially several of my closest research participants. By presenting empirical accounts that mixes real world participation and social media posts to demonstrate how digital capital online permeates IRL and vice versa, the chapter advances **The Digital IRL neologism by clearly demonstrating how social media practices are informed and affect lives and behaviours in real life.** Interestingly, I also explore the case example of an activist without a notable social media presence and therefore who has limited access to digital capital and the consequences they face IRL as a result.

In addition to unpacking the implications of the post-digital condition on digital activism, the chapter will also explore the consequences of the post-digital in relation to digital ethnography and digital capital. Because the digital will be understood as something purposefully IRL, questions emerge as the efficacy of terms such as digital ethnography and digital capital. Building on points made in *Chapter 1* and *Chapter 4*, I will argue that digital capital accumulation is an essential practice for successful augmented ethnography amongst influencer and highly visible social media communities because social media affordances condition users to appreciate digital capital as the de facto metric of a fellow users' knowhow and legitimacy. By acquiring digital capital on social media through daily interactions in advance of arriving in Sri Lanka, I gained trust amongst information influencers, allowing me to augment my ethnography IRL at important events such as the Community Assembly political rally, that in turn leads to a selfie with a hugely popular lifestyle influencer, and the unpleasant story of an activist without digital capital suffering egregious abuse.

The chapter is structured in seven forthcoming sections. I start with a depiction of the Community Assembly's first ever political meet up, describing my experience of meeting a diverse group of information influencers, and move onto a discussion about their coordinated activities to activate the release of Wasantha from prison. It will emerge that there is an intrinsic relationship between IRL protests and social media posting. In section three I provide the case example of the consequences of having no digital capital, before a deep discussion on the complexity and usefulness of the ubiquitous term digital and the emergent, 'post-digital'. The three final sections apply the post—digital theoretical lens to the practices of digital activism, digital ethnography and digital capital accumulation.

7.2 | Activism IRL @ The Community

Assembly

November 2022: A man I come to know very well finishes his speech at the Community Assembly, a new coalition of Sri Lankan political groups encompassing the four major ethnicities and spanning groups from across the island. The speech is littered with powerful evocations, from distressing statistics on the number of children suffering malnutrition, to proud declarations about chasing out Gotabaya Rajapaksa, not only from the presidency, but out of the country and into exile. Lahiru also reminds us that the fight is far from finished, as the new incumbent, president Ranil Wickremesinghe, advances a new state of oppression, amending national constitution and legislation to constrict Sri Lankan democratic rights to free assembly and protest. A special mention is given to 'Wasantha', an active protester in last year's *Aragalaya*, who has been arrested and detained for several months under the PTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act).

Far from being a terrorist, Wasantha is a current student and leader of the nationwide Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF).

As part of my ethnographic research, I attended this political rally as an ally and observer, the sole 'foreigner' amongst appropriately 300+ Sri Lankan protesters at a prominent conference centre in central Colombo. I had been invited by Lahiru the previous week to 'the first Community Assembly', and, I must say, I had expected something more intimate, perhaps, something more discreet. To my surprise, this was a large, conspicuous event more akin to a pop concert. There were two storey lighting-systems and raised tv cameras angled to capture the large stage and lectern sporting 7 or 8 large tv microphones, and behind the stage was a cinema-like screen promising spectacular visuals. Upon arrival, I scanned the busy room, and I saw Lahiru on the far side of the room, facing the other way, ponytail up, neck-crooked, presumably at a laptop. Looking back at the entrance, I saw Valli, a climate activist I recognise from Instagram. Despite so many eyes on her, she looks relaxed, social, and glides through the crowd.

I text Lahiru on WhatsApp to say, 'I'm here', and moments later he's by my side, pointing me in the direction of his wife Isuri and his mother who are sitting near the front. As we move through the rows of chairs, like a local celebrity—him not me—Lahiru instantly introduces me to a dreadlocked photographer, who high-fives me with an open left hand as he clutches his SLR in his right. Next to us now is Valli; we shake hands, and I say I recognise her from 'Bosco's Insta'. She blushes slightly and looks like she's busy and needs to be somewhere else. Lahiru was evidently nervous as he had his speech coming up, but he wanted to be a good host and sit me with his family.

We are now sitting fourth row from the front on the left side, next to one of the main light stands. I hadn't seen Isuri or his mother since Lahiru's

birthday celebrations last week and it's good to be back in their warm company. Our position gives a panoramic view of the stage, but limited view of the crowd. Around us I can see mainly groups of middle-aged men, dressed youthfully in faded flat caps and storied polo shirts. The crowd is older than I expected; I had imagined radical 'youth'. In the front row, the audience is clerical: Buddhist monks in saffron robes, Catholic pastors, Muslim clerics, but no obvious Hindu holy men. There are some women but there are no children. Later, when a baby behind us cries, Isuri looks back quite visibly irritated, and the mother swiftly takes her cue and leaves with the baby.

After an hour or so of chatter and anticipation, the lights dim and a line of musicians' stream into the room, playing instrumentals as they take the stage. There is a brass section accompanying by ringing bells and deep, thunderous drums. The band play continuously for 15 minutes, the same rhythm, same drum line: *boom, br brrr brrrrr! boom!* plus the incessant bells. The lights go down, and more musicians join the stage: a man dressed in a bucket hat, sunglasses and jeans with his acoustic guitar strapped high to his chest (Beatles-esque), and a female bass player wearing skinny jeans and a baggy black t-shirt with the slogan 'Unfuck the World'. Another man, sitting on a what looks like a speaker but it is a drum, is wearing only shorts. Otherwise, he is bare-chested, with huge beads around his neck, a 'NYC' baseball cap, and numerous bells strapped to his legs, so every-vibration adds to the dirge. The sound is foreboding and intense, but the female bass player wails beautifully over the top. Isuri leans into my earshot and whispers loudly, '*THIS* is Sri Lankan revolution music!'

Over the next 3 hours, appropriately 15 speakers take to the stage, addressing the public in the three languages of the tri-lingual state: English, Sinhala and Tamil. The overarching rhetoric is cross-cultural unity, an end to sectarian politics, and 'system-change'. Valli, who later

becomes a close research participant of mine, takes the stage around 5pm. Despite her diminutive frame and youthful looks, her voice, amplified by the microphones, is clear and commanding. She begins by outlying the various marginalised groups of Sri Lanka— 'the farmers, fisherman, factory manufacturers, construction workers'—and it is notable how Valli resists categorising these groups by their ethnicity or religion as is common practice in Sri Lanka. For example, it is rare to mention the people who work the tea plantations without mentioning the Malayaga Tamils who were bought to Sri Lanka by the British administration in the mid-1800s to work the tea plantations of the central highlands (Ryder, 2018). The Upcountry Tamils as they are popularly known are the most marginalised minority group on the island and different to the Sri Lanka Tamils who claims to indigeneity extends back to the Middle Ages.

Valli's public speaking is undeniably impressive. So much so, that a minute into her call-to-arms, I hear muffled people around me asking in Sinhala, '*Who is she?*' Her speech precedes Lahiru's closing remarks by a good hour, but she foregrounds his socialism, saying, 'The oppression that is created through this toxic system doesn't value people or the planet... a system that prioritises profit over anything.' Through her oration, for the first time I come to realise how entrenched worker rights are with the sustainability of the natural environment, especially in an economy that relies predominately on agriculture, fishing and garment production. In a later conversation, Lahiru tells me that the way to get through to Sri Lankan peoples' hearts and minds is through the evocation of a lost biodiversity: of animal extinction and the loss of natural habitat, and I understand how Lahiru, a member of the USP Sri Lanka (United Socialist Party), and Valli, an environmentalist activist, have become close political collaborators because they are advocating for the same ends: people and the planet need to be prioritised over profit.

After more than four hours of music and speeches without a break, I'm in the atrium and I'm flagging. There are rumours of refreshments at the back, and I find scores of people, parched, sipping warm milk tea. I take the brew preloaded with sugar and milk powder and its instant recovery. Moseying back now, I see Valli and quickly say well done for a brilliant, impactful speech. She is grateful and I briefly take the opportunity to introduce my research and explain what I've been doing with Lahiru, and that I'd like to collaborate with other activists who are using social media for political participation. She says I should check out her non-person Instagram page where she publishes environmentally conscientious content, and I should message her for a coffee soon. Of all the influencers I go on to work with Valli has one of the smallest accumulations of digital capital. Her climate change-branded Instagram page has approximately 4,000 followers and her personal Twitter, Facebook and Instagram profiles have less. I often found myself weighing up in my if she 'qualified' as an information influencer due to this relatively small (in comparison) stockpile, but her role and influence in the wider activist community was evident, and perhaps, I reconciled, that I should not shy away from a research participant just because they potentially upset my building conceptual argument whilst in the field.

Isuri then introduces me to Nala for the first time, the activist who has featured predominately in *Chapter 5* about affordance folklore. Nala tells me she is many things: a mental health worker, an activist, a Facebook influencer (with over 25,000 followers), a master's student and a wife. She is accommodating and completely open to participate in my research too. Nala even invites me to 'Trinco', a city on the East Coast, for a Tamil Catholic project she is planning later in the November. She tells me she is not Tamil though, but she is a Catholic.

Excited and reenergised now from the tea and organic snowballing of my research, Lahiru walks me back to the tearoom to meet Praseema, the

superstar Instagram and TikTok influencer that I had heard so much about. As introduced in *Chapter 3*, she has 270,000+ followers across both platforms and is one of the most successful lifestyle influencers in Sri Lanka, making sponsored content for various fashion, travel and cosmetic brands. The reason I should meet Praseema, I am reliably informed, is that she has also used her platform during the *Aragalaya* to promote anti-government protests and resistance, thereby risking her brand alignment, reputation and livelihood. For someone so 'instafamous' she is very shy, and we talk briefly about what an inspiring day it's been. The next half hour passes much the same as Lahiru hugs this way through friends and allies, introducing me along the way. There's an older lady wearing a sari who tells me she was entirely unprepared for her speech, but all I remember is how powerful it was.

After the event, Lahiru, Isuri and I go for dinner at a South Indian restaurant for chana masala and garlic nan. Lahiru is delighted with the turnout at the event and keeps saying with a huge grin, 'There were so many people'. I say to him that I couldn't believe how many people he knew and the camaraderie he had with so many of them.

'I only met all those guys during the *Aragalaya*.'

'Really, I thought they were old school buddies of yours. You all seemed so close!'

We finish the long day talking deeply about social media and about politics and protest. I would say these are Lahiru's favourite topics, not only the subject of my research, and I tell him how grateful I am for his participation and for introducing me to so many important people today. He shrugs, suggesting that doing what he has done—connecting people—is habit rather effort.

The significance of this event in the second week of my fieldwork cannot be understated for how it first grounded, and then enabled, my ethnography. Before this, I had conducted digital ethnography from the UK, creating eye catching political content about Sri Lanka and developing relationships with ten potential interlocutors, including Lahiru, who I had met on social media for preliminary interviews. Now, suddenly, it seemed I had access, via Lahiru's network and influence, to a whole burgeoning political movement. Moreover, these people were not only users of social media who appeared to wield considerable influence (according to visual network analysis or other opaque platform metrics), but were on the ground, affecting system change. The Community Assembly Movement which I had been welcomed into had an inclusive and emphatic tone that, as the subsequent ethnographic descriptions will demonstrate, was premised on the implicit understanding that the revolution they wanted could only be instilled by a collaboration between online and offline networks (see Lim, 2012).

7.3 | Wasantha's release: How information influencers influence

In the first few days of February 2023, Wasantha was absolved of all charges under the PTA and released from custody after 176 days inside prison. The timing was not inconsequential, the political atmosphere in the country was ramping up as Independence Day celebrations were scheduled for the 4th of the month. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had grabbed power during the *Aragalaya* after the protestors ousted the Rajapaksa regime, was under fire from numerous political and protests groups who claimed the two-billion rupee budget (approx. £5 million) for the celebrations, that included elaborate fireworks, free concerts and a

fairground on Galle Face Green (the original occupation site of last year's Aragalaya protests) was a brazen waste of public funds, especially when there are citizens nationwide starving, and hospitals do not have access to essential medicines. Information influencer, Bosco, told me that 'Ranil', as the incumbent president is commonly referred to, is all too aware that he will not survive next year's election so he 'needs this moment and is prepared to do anything to hold on'.

The day after Wasantha's release, Nala, the Facebook influencer Isuri had introduced me to towards the end of the Community Assembly meeting, told me about the activist collaboration that occurred between online and IRL networks to force the decision. The Community Assembly had organised an affidavit with over 12,000 signatures from citizens stating that they too were protestors at the Aragalaya, in the same way that Wasantha was, and therefore if they are to arrest and detain the head of the IUSF, then they must arrest and detain all the signatures enclosed. According to Lahiru, one of the most impressive things about the affidavit was its breadth, with signatures from people in Jaffna in the North, Batticaloa on the East Coast, and Nuwara Eliya in the Central Highlands, not only signalling that there was still many people 'pissed off', but that they are united across class and ethnic lines, and city to rural divides which have historically been deeply entrenched. Despite only being Facebook friends—Nala had never actually met Wasantha but said when she saw him at protests he was 'always smiling' and showing so much 'courage and passion'—she volunteered to be the second signature on the affidavit. The fearlessness of Nala's visible activism here cannot be underestimated for when the affidavit was in its infancy with only a handful of signatures, the signees were at risk of instant detention. It was only once the document had gathered numbers into the hundreds and thousands that the individuals become a collective and therefore harder to prosecute and more difficult to ignore. Regardless of the risk of being one of the first to sign the bill, being an information influencer with over 25,000 Facebook

followers, it made sense for Nala to lead the way and then announce her position on her platform to influence broader public support for the release of a political prisoner.

The whole campaign was incredibly emotional for Nala. She had cried when she heard Wasantha was being released, not because of their personal relationship, but because it showed her what can be achieved when people come together. Moreover, it served as a reminder of all the other political prisoners, many Tamil and Muslim, who are being detained under false pretences for years and decades, and who also need collective action to secure their freedom. However, it is unlikely that this coalition of people's power could shift the politics of the authoritarian state enough to release Tamil and Muslim political prisoners. The affidavit worked because Wasantha is Sinhalese. As a highly active and visible member of the *Aragalaya* and leader of the vilified IUSF, Wasantha was an obvious target for government persecution, but he is also a Sinhala youth and that's why the Community Assembly managed to accrue something close to 50 lawyers to support the bill and over 12,000 signatures island wide. Nala conceded that when she has tried to organise affidavits for the release campaigns of Tamil prisoners, she had to 'literally beg' to get only two lawyers to represent them, because people, even legal professionals, fear persecution if they are seen to be supporting minorities accused of terrorism. 'Wasantha had privilege: the same privilege that I'm going to have being Sinhalese', Nala said, equally grateful and remorseful.

For five months leading up to the Wasantha's release from prison, I had been tracking content posted on social media by several of my research participants relating to Wasantha's unfair imprisonment. As far back as September 2022, Valli was posting content across her social media platforms, advocating for Wasantha's and other detainees' releases, and by the end of month, when Wasantha had been in imprisoned for 43 days, Valli tagged 39 of her closest comrades in a Facebook post, and appealed

more broadly to 'the hundreds and thousands of people who were part of' the Aragalaya that Wasantha had been apprehended for participating in. Having previously been detained herself for her involvement in the protests, Valli explained that she had seen her fellow countrymen being tortured.

A few days later, to mark the 50 days of Wasantha's detention under the PTA, Nala shared a Facebook campaign, linking to a google form, to call for his release. This is a gateway for the affidavit-proper, a way to gain momentum, spread awareness and test the temperature of whether ordinary citizens are willing to support their campaign despite the potential of arrests and state oppression. To mark the 100-day anniversary of Wasantha's imprisonment, a core group of approximately 20 protesters stage a *satyagraha* (peaceful protest), sitting in silence outside the United Nations Sri Lanka, with each silent protestor simply holding an A4 piece of paper with Wasantha's face printed on it. Praseema, the lifestyle influence and Instagram and TikTok celebrity with 280,000 followers who I had been introduced to at the Community Assembly, is photographed, looking solemn and austere. Praseema's outfit and expression are conspicuously different to the content that she is renown her: glammers beachwear and dance routines to Sinhala pop-music. By only tagging Praseema in the post, Valli is consciously harnessing Praseema's extraordinary digital capital to increase the protest movement's reach and exposure. Praseema's vast followership likely transcends the traditional activist networks that Valli and her closest allies maintain; people one may suspect who are already in support of the Aragalaya and their mission to obtain Wasantha's pardon. Therefore, Praseema's presence, both IRL at the *satyagraha* and online across various social media platforms has a snowball effect of reaching people outside of the movement's most committed followers. Moreover, given Praseema's digital capital being based on Instagram and TikTok, platforms, that in comparison to Twitter, have a less political and informational edge being more visual and

aesthetic based, the movement attempts to reach Sri Lankans on social media who may not be specifically following protest content or interested in politics, per se.

Months later, in early January 2023, Valli posts a video and images of Sri Lankan police beating student protestors who were demanding Wasantha's release and the repeal of PTA. Knowing the hashtag #PoliceBrutality has been a trending and politically pertinent topic of contestation on social media following the global #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) movement, triggered by the brutal police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, in 2020, Valli's instructive use of the hashtag #PoliceBrutality situates the resistance of Sri Lanka students into the broader global conversation about oppressive state actors and police heavy-handedness.

Having visited the prison of Wasantha detention, through photos and posts, his comrades build the narrative that the head of the student union is a joyful young man, even whilst under wrongful arrest. Vis-à-vis images and descriptions of the shocking police brutality above, Valli's subsequent post portrays Wasantha as a humble and optimistic Sri Lankan. Wasantha was allowed to be passed some home-cooked rice and curry through the jail bars in a plastic lunchbox, but Valli is quick to point out the inhumanity of the police who 'mixed the food together with their bare hands' to ensure no contrabands were being smuggled inside the food. The reference is likely to have resonated with many Sri Lankans who grew up during the civil war under highly securitised and oppressive social restrictions. One of my informants, Siri, told me that whilst she went to school in Anuradhapura, a region of significant Buddhist importance in the northern half of the island, she and her classmates had army men sift through her rice and curry packed-lunch every day at school, even though the war had finished and *even* though she was Sinhala Buddhist. Valli's social media post

emphasised that despite such gross breaches of human decency, Wasantha was always smiling.

Bosco, arguably Valli's closest ally and one of the most charismatic of all the information influencers I worked closely with, had been conspicuously quiet on Wasantha's release campaign, but then he shared a group photo of his comrades with the accompanying legal team and religious leaders. Calling themselves, 'Avengers Assembled', Bosco plays with contemporary characterisations from the Marvel comics and movies, and with tongue-firmly-in-cheek, calls his colleagues, superheroes. On the day of the affidavit submission, Valli is optimistic for a positive outcome and Lahiru says on a phone call to me that he really wants Wasantha released because he is such a vital part of their protest machine. Wasantha is 'down to earth and good with people', insinuating that there are activists like himself who can be influential online, but they equally need people who can inspire and coordinate action on the ground. The following day Wasantha is released.

7.4 | The price of no digital capital

January 2023: During my six months in Colombo, I spent many days out of 'the field' writing notes and transcribing interviews at SiliLanka, a software house that builds apps and 'digital solutions' for international clients⁴. Having been a journalist in Sri Lanka previously (2016-18), I had interviewed the SiliLanka founder for a small documentary I worked on about the burgeoning start-up ecosystem in Colombo, and we had remained friends. They allowed me to work two days a week in the office and make the most of their lightning-fast internet and air-conditioning (a necessary evil in the sweltering hotpot of Colombo). An enormous benefit

⁴ SiliLanka is a pseudonym

of hanging out there was that I got to meet a very different strata of the metropolitan youth. The coders, designers and marketers at SiliLanka were, on the surface at least, very different, from the activists and information influencers that were the focus of my research. Last year's Aragalaya was, in the main, a disturbance and had put Sri Lanka in a bad light, internationally. When protests were happening nearby, orchestrated by Lahiru, Valli, Bosco, Nala and others, no one from SiliLanka seemed to pay attention, only bemoaning that the protests meant road closures and heavy traffic making getting home harder. Not really knowing what my research was about, my officemates at SiliLanka were almost embarrassed that these unruly protests were happening whilst I was visiting.

However, due to high visibility on social media of my research subjects, it was inevitable that my close connection to several Aragalaya protesters was going to surface. The moment came following a coffee with Praseema, the lifestyle influencer with an activist side hustle, who had taken a selfie of the two of us and posted it on her Instagram stories. I should add that this incident highlights the challenge of doing digital ethnography with highly visible social media users, especially in societies or with groups who are the targets of government oppression. Naturally, one of my fieldwork's personal goals was to remain out of the public eye and away from the attention of government goons. However, a conflicting goal was to achieve social media visibility in order to gain trust amongst an activist-influencer cohort who valued social media participation very highly. But in this instance with Praseema, I had little agency over what was to happen. At the end of our conversation, she offered a selfie and without having time to think we were smiling together for her raised smartphone. My feeling is that participating in selfies, group photos and posts of this kind was unavoidable because life-steaming daily activities was the *modus operandi* for influencers like Praseema, and refusal would have been rude and/or insulting. I suspect that Praseema saw that her posting a selfie with

me was like her gifting me platform visibility as it was likely people would follow me if they saw me on her Instagram stories. More than a message that she likes and accepts me, I was experiencing first-hand the exchange and flow of digital capital from her social world into mine.

Thus, as I arrived the following day at the SiliLanka office, Magdalena the receptionist, excitedly exclaims, 'I didn't know you were friends with Praseema!', and it suddenly dawned on me, that one of Praseema's 135,000 Instagram followers was Magdalena. Normally, the conversations I had with Magdalena were about cricket or whatever 'Reels' she was watching on Instagram, but at lunch, over our 'rice packet' that we order via the mobile app *Uber Eats* and had delivered by a man on a scooter, Magdalena wants to talk to me about the *Aragalaya*. Before this moment I should iterate that despite building many friendly relationships with people in the SiliLanka office, I had not explicitly described my research interests, saying it was only about 'social media', not activism. As we started to talk, I should have guessed that Magdalena had some activist tendencies because she is controversial amongst her office colleagues for being a Sri Lankan cricket fan who supports the nation's biggest rival, India, an obvious indicator of her transgressive and provocative nature. The first thing she tells me is that she is planning to leave the country for Canada in April (less than three months away), and the reason is that her fiancé is in danger. He was heavily involved in the *Aragalaya*, and he was badly beaten up by 'the cops' during a protest last year and hospitalised for a few days. Then more recently, some men—'maybe they were police, but they were dressed in 'thugs clothes'—came to her fiancé's family's home in a suburb south of Colombo and threatened the parents and the son. They are only a 'simple Sinhala Buddhist family' but the thugs told them they were 'Sinhala filth for betraying the country' and spoke of beatings and death camps.

Naturally, the parents were petrified, and her fiancé is very scared too, so they are being told by all family members on both sides to 'get out'⁵.

Magdalena's fiancé had excelled as an undergraduate in accountancy at a Sri Lanka university and had applied for a master's program in North America. Shortly afterward he was accepted, and the families' pooled resources, applied for visas, and Magdalena and her partner left Sri Lanka, indefinitely, in May. Plenty of their protestor-friends had also 'escaped', but surprisingly, Magdalena didn't feel too sad about being made to leave the country under such duress. As was her way, she was sanguine, but she did say that her fiancé was different to Praseema, Bosco and my other activist colleagues because he does not have a large social media network. Her implication was that activists with big social media bases were immune from anything 'bad' happening because they are insulated by their followings who would be made aware of any abuse of power. Whilst we cannot confirm if this is objectively true, it is convincing theory. I recalled Siri's story of sharing her experience of sexual harassment in the street on twitter, (explored in *Chapter 3*) and how, as an influencer with 11,000 followers at the time, she received a call from the Namal Rajapaksa, the president's son, who invited her to Temple Trees to discuss plans to put together a special task force to stop violence against women. I am almost certain that would not have happened if Siri did not have a large twitter following. Then again, Nala had told me a story about random men coming to her house with threatening tones (in spite of her massive Facebook followers) but, fortunately, she was not in, and her neighbours had intercepted and misdirected their vague inquiries.

⁵ I had to retrospectively request Magdalena informed consent as this conversation was unplanned. She was glad to participate but I do not think she would have wanted to if she was not leaving Sri Lanka. We are still in touch, and they are now settled aboard.

7.6 | Digital this, digital that

Digital might well be the most overused word of our times. Media, health, work, marketing, anthropology – all have been reimagined via the ubiquitous catch-all prefix, ‘digital’. This has been happening for approximately twenty-five years and while it does not appear to be coming unstuck, there are precedents for popular prefixes losing credibility and/or becoming usurped by the next big thing. Whether from the digital devices in our pockets or legacy news media headlines that lament the rise of the digital, we should come to recognise that almost all cultural production is somehow digitalised, and digitalisation has either happened or happening. This has even given rise to the term ‘post-digital’, coined as far back as 2000, ironically around the same time that ‘digital’ started to gather popularity, to describe 'either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical' (Cascone, 2000, page). Yet, conceptually, ‘post-digital’ has not caught on, not at least to anthropologists and social scientists still getting to grips with the digital in their research, especially in regard to the subject of digital activism and the object of digital ethnography. When researchers study contemporary forms of resistance, dissent and rebellion or they engage via methodology of digital ethnography they often knowingly emphasise the role of digital technologies in orchestrating protest or enabling the novel modularity of research, portraying a clear lack of *disenchantment* with the prevalence of digitally mediating technologies into their research. It may appear counterintuitive but, in this chapter, I argue that it is time to see both digital activism and digital ethnography as intrinsically non-digital via the ongoing material realisation of our post-digital condition.

What is digital? it may be helpful to first ask. The distinction between what is digital and the not digital is open to debate. Between the fields of media studies and anthropology, definitions veer from the precise and formulaic, to abstract conceptions that ultimately question *what is not digital?*

Recently, media scholar, David Hesmondhalgh (2019, 2021) published two articles that outline the precise parameters of what constitutes the digital. Digitalisation 'refers to electronic storage and transmission that involves converting images, words, sounds and so on into binary code that can be read and stored by computers – including those embedded in mobile phones' (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, page). We can understand, then, that the digital is the reduction of cultural artefacts into 1s and 0s and this process of abstraction is wholly reliant on series of material infrastructures: electricity and its legion of wires and conductors, the equally tangible technologies that create internet connectivity, and the haptic computer systems in our hands and on our desks (Hesmondhalgh, 2021). The main thesis of Hesmondhalgh articles is to emphasis the unresolved tension between the seemingly anti-capitalist democratising forces of digitalisation and its overreliance on existing and emerging infrastructures that are operated by and through existing systems of power, notably capitalism. The process of digitalisation whereby value is reduced to instantly replicable, storable and sharable code is intrinsically democratising because the traditional gatekeepers of cultural artefacts including information are leapfrogged by the immediacy of digital code. However, this democratising potential falls flat because the commercial internet has evolved to be dominated by a small group of elite software companies who have amassed more wealth than ever before, and moreover, the actual physical infrastructures of the internet are built on and utilise historic and colonial lay lines of trade and communication thereby reproducing existing inequalities to access, privileging those at the centre and marginalising the many on the periphery.

Another approach to the definition of the digital is to trace the etymology of the term digital to the Latin *digitalis* meaning 'finger'. Conceptually, the attributes of the digital are analogous to the virtues of a human finger because both are tools used to 'name, count, point and manipulate' (Peters, 2019). This more abstract perspective of the digital strongly resists the ontological divide between the computation and non-computational in digital definitions, suggesting that the digital encompasses anything 'that humans interface with *digitally*, or with our fingers via manual manipulation and push buttons' (ibid. page). In the *Introduction* I have emphasised the anthropological trope that humanity is not one iota more mediated by the digital, implying that pre-internet-enabled artefacts are *as* mediating as internet-enabled artefacts. As such, a guitar, rosary and analog typewriter *are* all digital. In *Chapter 6*, we saw how Elon Musk and Mahinda Rajapaksa's possession of the vajra had serious mediating effects on the information influencer, Piyanka, and, here, a new question emerges. Was Piyanka mediated by the digitally reproduced image of Musk's vajra on Google search via his desktop computer, or was it the vajra itself, in all its Buddhist cosmology and meaning? Peters does a good job of answering this somewhat speculative question: 'to understand our digital age we must understand not only the numbers—that digit's count, compute, construct, and copy internally discrete symbolic worlds—but that digital media can point to or index all possible worlds, not only our real one' (Peters, 201..., page).

While I observe a divide between those who emphasis digitalisation as the process by which cultural artefacts are reduced to 1s and 0s for instant replication, storage and circulation, and the abstract emphasis on the mediating potential of all things, whether internet enabled or not, there is common ground between the two as both conceptual understandings stress the intrinsic materiality of the digital. By drawing attention to the material nature of the digital, either by the infrastructural turn that places focus on the 'boring stuff' that make digitalisation happen, or the haptic

relationship humans have with material objects that cause meditation, we can transcend one of the enduring mythologies that embody how the digital is marketed and popularly imagined. Our photos, music and files that Hesmondhalgh refers to as being reduced to 1s and 0s are not safely stored in a fluffy cloud as marketers may suggest, rather they are physically stored in enormous, heavily securitised data storage units, that are far removed from towns and cities, embroidering the myth that the digital is somehow frictionless. It can be argued that the more entrenched divide exists between how the digital is repeatedly imagined as 'weightless' or 'contactless' and the hardwires of infrastructures and haptic interactions required to operate digital technologies, whether it is by swipe, scroll or increasingly voice.

With the recent emergence of multi-disciplinary scholarship on the rise of the post-digital, the importance of the infrastructural and the haptic practices of the digital have become more visible than previously held. Far from indicating that the digital era is behind us, the post digital 'heralds a new phase wherein the digital has become self-evident, hardly distinct from the non-digital' (Rasch, 2018, 53). According to Jandric et al (2019), the post-digital is a more useful term than digital because it grapples with the problems the digital could not resolve. By deemphasising the role of the digital in contemporary social life it treats digital and non-digital artefacts as equal, as both profoundly mediating. Moreover, like any intrinsic infrastructure, the digital should only be notable by its absence (Negroponte 1998). We can imagine that an ethnographer only comments on the existence of the road if the road is blocked or damaged. Thus, given the ubiquitous of digital technologies around the world and into all forms of cultural life, should we only emphasis the digital in a state of absence or abuse?

I believe the above ethnographic descriptions go some way to shed light on this question and theorise why and under what circumstances the post-

digital is a useful analytic in the worlds of (digital) activism, (digital) ethnography and (digital) capital accumulation. It is to these three critical terms that I now turn.

7.7 | Not so digital activism

There is little doubt, the mass proliferation of internet-enabled communications via smart devices has significantly changed the way social movements collectively organise and promote their activities. In 2015, Athina Karatzogianni's book, 'Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism (1994-2014)' distils twenty years of digital activism into four identifiable phases beginning with the Mexican Zapatistas movement in the early 1990s. Considered to be the first recorded group to organise collectively and gather global awareness of their mission via their use of internet communications, despite their relative small scale, influential sociologist, Manuel Castells (1996, 2009, 2012) has based years of research on the Zapatistas, emphasising Deleuze and Guattari's theory of rhizomatic networks to reimagine how network effects enabled by digitalisation provides a potent modality of resistance because networks rely on non-hierarchical participation whilst the structures they are trying to disrupt such as government regimes and corporations have been built on top-down power structures that are prone to the dexterity of rhizomatic networks. The final phrase of Karatzogianni's twenty-year overview focuses on the mainstreaming of digital activism, detailing the series of global popular uprisings in 2011, including Occupy Wall Street in New York, the 15-M Movement in Spain and the Arab Spring. The unifying element of these political movements was the explicit use of social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook; a significant shift from the previous three phases of digital activism where practice was more technical and reserved for provincial areas of the internet.

The story of Wasantha's release appears to support the broad theory that the network effect of digital communications is a significant driver for our digital activism has potential to disrupt. The affidavit that successfully activated Wasantha's release was trailed, shared and coordinated on social media and it relied on network effects to gather momentum and gravitas. Castell's argues that the rhizomic networks installed by digital communications empower activists to fight IRL institutions that are organised by anachronistic, analog forms of organisation. When the number of signatures on the affidavit was in its initial stages, an early signature, Nala, placed herself in danger of police persecution because the power of the affidavit only grew once it obtained support into the hundreds and thousands, and it became impossible or unrealistic to arrest and detain thousands of ordinary people due to impractical costs and logistics. This is a similar principle of the network effect that social media and the wider digital ecosystem is built on. In the book, *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek describes how platform business models have been founded on user numbers and growth, not costs or even sales. The fundamental business model bargains that the more users populate a platform the more indispensable the system becomes to its users.

As should becoming clear by now, the collapse of the online/offline binary is well under way, but rather than merely regurgitate point, I want to focus on the intrinsic connection between the post-digital, or what can be framed as the digital and non-digital, in production of the required network effect to enable Wasantha's release. The Satyāgraha my activist colleagues staged outside of the United Nations building is a distinctly pre-digital form of non-violent performance of civil resistance that was first orchestrated during the India independence movement under freedom fighter, Mahatma Gandhi (Hazama, 2023). It is in this way that the protests for Wasantha's release, whilst doubtlessly organised and amplified by digital technology, are also *mediated* by historic practices relational to the

lived experiences and history of South Asian resistant movements against oppression. In the Sri Lankan media, that is predominately state-run, the *Aragalaya* protestors had been routinely framed as 'violent and aggressive traitors'. The silent protests therefore serve to stand in (peaceful) opposition to the violence handed out by state actors and reinscribe the supporters of the *Aragalaya* as non-confrontational and harmonious. A similar process of identity-signalling is being played out when Valli consistently portrays Wasantha as a joyful and happy young man despite the mistreatment he is subjected too by the Sri Lankan state. The narrative she constructions on social media is that even whilst he imprisoned and suffering the callousness of the police who abuse their power by manhandling and spoiling his food, is supported by Valli's instructive use of the #policebrutality hashtags, indexing the plight of Sri Lankan protestors in the global discourse on Black Lives Matter and the boarder context of marginalising people suffering the abuse at the hands of state actors. What is interesting about the stories and realities being indexed by these activist activities are broadly different, but they share powerful symbolism. Satyāgraha as a method of civil disobedience appears like a distinctly twentieth century South Asian protest practice (although Gandhi did adopt the method to fight for the rights of Indian denatured labours in South Africa), and the hashtag #policebrutality and the wider connection to Black Lives Matter movement is contemporary and global in reach and application. Despite these temporal and geographic discrepancies, both seamlessly integrate and index the struggle of ordinary people against power, without diluting or misrepresenting the unique context of the 2022-23 Sri Lankan *Aragalaya*.

What does this imply for the notion of a post-digital activism? Digital activism in its myriad forms, has intensified in the years since with the rapid global proliferation of social media and smartphones creating the conditions for some of the biggest political movements in modern history including #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, the Hong Kong protests and

numerous other movements that have challenged the status quo and created real world change, including the Aragalaya in Sri Lanka. Can we agree that these movements are more than merely digital activism, because significant components of their causation are through non-digital practices and processes? When Valli talks emphatically in front of crowded auditorium at the Community Assembly she is surely not doing digital activism, but when she tags Praseema and her comrades at the silent protest in a social media post to maximise the reach of their message she surely *is* engaging in digital activist practices. As stated earlier, Coleman's view is that the term digital activism is insufficient analytically as it boxes together too many diverse online practices, and whilst I echo this sentiment, my ethnographic descriptions argue that, in addition, it is the notion of a post-digital condition that problematises the usefulness of 'digital activism'. Valli's two disparate practices are less discreet than first imagined and more an expression of the growing and undeniable entanglements between the on and offline world and practices that I euphemise as The Digital IRL. In *Chapter 3* I introduced the people of my study as information influencers and substantiated this new conceptual cohort via deep discussion about the blurring lines between activist practices and influencer cultures. This chapter compliments my claim that 'digital activist' is not an accurate signifier for the people of my study because when we welcome the notion of a post-digital condition, we resist overemphasising the role of the digital in practices that have today been ubiquitous to the point of saturation. Are we getting towards a post-digital experience when posting a photo on social media is as ubiquitous, common sense and, dare I say, boring, as a raft of common place practices installed by societal infrastructures: such as drinking tap water, flushing chains and hopping on and off the transport?

7.8 | Towards a post-digital ethnography

In the past 30 years, the breakneck proliferation of digital media has provoked a collection of emerging methodologies, cyberethnography (ref), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), netnography (Kozinets, 2010), that today, sit under the broader umbrella term, ‘digital ethnography’ (de Seta et al. 2023). Conceptually, digital ethnography appears to be less problematic than the term digital activism because digital ethnography has always implied a concern with online and offline networks and processes. For example, Madianou and Miller’s (2013) concept of polymedia is theorised through a purposeful IRL ethnographic study of the lives of Filipino migrant mothers in the UK and their left behind families and children. Despite focussing on the instrumental communication choices mothers make to maintain relations with their faraway offspring, the study does not feel technological, freely situating stories of motherly care and migration among discussions of web cams and emails chains. In contrast, reviewing the seminal works of Boellstorf (2008) and Nardi (2009), Boellstorf et al (2012) claim they are not digital ethnographers, because their long-term commitment to sustained contact with gaming communities are wholly immersed in emergent computation spaces, referring to themselves as a ‘ethnographers of virtual worlds’ (ibid. 4). Thus, due to digital ethnography implying a deep consideration of the material and offline effects of internet-enabled communications, I observe that digital ethnography has always maintained something close to a post-digital perspective.

In the *Introduction* I called my methodological practice as augmented ethnography, a procedure that collaborates datafied, online and in-person modalities. In this chapter, the more classical, or analog, side of digital ethnography is clearly demonstrated. The description of Community Assembly political meet up is viscerally IRL, thanks to handshakes with

Lahiru's colleagues, intense, foreboding 'Sri Lankan protest music', and my rasping thirst due to four hours of speeches without a break. Like an intrinsic infrastructure, the digital is only notable for its (almost) entire absence from the description. There is the one moment when Lahiru finds me in the busy crowd thanks to a simple WhatsApp text, suggesting there is seldom a moment when a text message (or some other digitally mediating communication), no matter how small and insignificant to the cultural phenomena being portrayed, is actively underwriting or reproducing the relationship between ethnographer and research participant, but because this mediation is not central to the focal-point of the narrative, it does not require thorough examination. Ethnographically, this is indicative of the work of Madianou and Miller's (2013), who do not place an emphasis their chosen medium of their communication with participants. For example, when they disseminate a survey for completion by participants, it is not specified if it is a physical paper survey, an online form, a mobile app, or some other means. Identification of this omission could lay the foundation of a critique of their ethnographic methods, but it strikes me that Madianou and Miller approach the social world in something close to a post digital condition where the digital is taken as unprivileged given; on par to IRL communications.

By treating the imprint of the digital in certain relationships as ambient, the asymmetrical power imbalances perpetuated by digital technologies are not ignored, but points of contention to explore are determined by the ethnographer and their subjects. WhatsApp messages between myself, Lahiru and others were so ubiquitous that it would only be noteworthy if Lahiru had not responded, or my smartphone failed, and has not formed a notable part of my ethnography, except when Bosco was hacked on *Instagram* and *Facebook Messenger*, and we chose WhatsApp to communicate because that service had not been hacked (see *Chapter 4* for more). In 2018 anthropologist, Rebekah Cupitt, published the provocative article, *We Have Never Been Digital Anthropologists*. Its main

purpose was to show, via the evocation of her field site at a Swedish television production company, how it was difficult to demarcate the digital in her study because 'there was no end to the digital, and no moment in which it was absent. It was simply there, entangled with people and their everyday lives' (2018, para 7). Specifically, Cupitt found that old-fashioned analog equipment was being plugged directly into contemporary digital systems confusing what was conceivable about the digital in the first place and what we assume to distinguish new and old technologies. While she does not explicitly consider the post-digital condition, instead citing Anna Haraway's influential work on cyborg-human relations, Cupitt highlights the terrific mundanity of the digital, arguing that the integration of human and technology is so succinct, or symbiotic, that to focus a study on a 'digital-something' is to misread what she calls, 'posthuman relationships'.

Following the modes of engagement put forward by Coleman, Cupitt, Madianou, Miller and my own experience of ethnography, would it be unfair to suggest that the 'digital' in digital ethnography is becoming superfluous in a social world where digital mediation is ubiquitous and difficult to overstate, arguing that all contemporary ethnography is in some way digitally mediated, such as the innocuous text exchange between Lahiru and myself to find each other in a busy crowd? I resist this line of argument because my objective here is to not try and render the digital prefix redundant, but to point out inconsistencies in the usage of the term 'digital' so we can locate more appropriate and sustainable applications for it. Contemporary scholars of digital activism, Coleman & Jandric (2019), question the validity of the digital because it detracts from the phenomenon's effects IRL and, also, unhelpfully lumps together too many disparate activist practices, leading me to introduce 'information influencer' as a more accurate descriptor of the people of my study. Digital ethnography is less problematic because one of the cornerstone tenets of digital anthropologists is that we need to accept and investigate the IRL

happenings of digital cultures. Still, given the digital's saturation in modern social life, digital ethnography does little to de-emphasise the role of the digital because the term essentialises the digital against non-digital ethnography.

7.9 | The Value of Digital Capital

One of the main contributions this monograph is trying to make is that digital capital accumulation and exchange is the central affordance of social media usage. Having problematised the 'digital' in digital activism and digital ethnography through the consideration of our post-digital condition, now I want to anticipate critique of the efficacy of digital capital as an analytical tool. Does the post-digital condition poleaxe my reconceptualization of digital capital?

In the *Introduction*, I discussed the satirical and political content that I produced and circulated as a mode of participant observation, demonstrating that by conducting visibility labour I earned digital capital amongst the Sri Lanka information influencers as the practice of researching and publishing high-quality content helped me become entangled in local debates. When Lahiru, with all his tens of thousands of followers, retweeted my 'Politically Autocorrect' content gathering thousands of impressions on my content and profile, my digital capital amongst the influencer community that I was trying to connect with significantly increased. Moreover, when I came to meet information influencers IRL at the Community Assembly for the first time, Lahiru would introduce me as the guy who made *that AutoCorrect* content, accelerating my acceptance into new influencer-activists' networks. I only met Praseema once after being introduced at the Community Assembly, but when she took a selfie of us both together and posted the photo on her

incredibly popular Instagram ‘Stories’, she was using her enormous digital capital stockpile as a gifting exercise to me, putting me in front of potentially hundreds of thousands of social media users. One of Praseema’s followers, Magdalena, who I already knew IRL from having a shared office space but had not disclosed my research interests on the sensitive topic of activism, saw the photo, opening a fresh ethnographic relationship. Thus, I argue that through my methodological research practice, digital capital emerges as more than a conceptual lens of how I theorise influence on social media to become the quintessential tool of how we do ethnography on and around influencers and other highly active social media communities. Upon arrival in Sri Lanka for in-person fieldwork, I had already built robust relationships with Lahiru, Bosco and Siri through consistent interactions in the material form of likes, comments and emojis on twitter and Instagram, exchanging and reaffirming each other’s digital capital. Indeed, I sense that the digital capital I accumulated on social media was not dissimilar to a second language insofar as it allowed me to communicate with influencers, gaining me their respect and trust. Influencers, whether their objective is activism or monetization, respect and respond to digital capital.

The post-digital perspective teaches us that regardless of the overuse of the digital prefix, we should not overlook internet-enabled technologies' relationship with regimes of power and the persistent tension between the democratising forces of digitalisation and its deep relationship with capitalism and the perpetuation of existing inequalities. What has emerged in recent literature on digital activism is the paradoxical nature of digital technologies and how they are in dual service to both resistance movements and the powerful structures that they are trying to disrupt. Anthropologist, Veronica Barassi (2015), meets the tension between the emancipatory potential of digital technologies versus their effectiveness as tools for oppression head on. In her ethnography, *Activism on the Web: Everyday Struggles with Digital Capitalism*, Barassi explores how the anti-

capitalist activists of her study are 'critically aware of the fact that the web has become a space for corporate surveillance and exploitation' (ibid. 13) and therefore Barassi has the challenge of exploring the ironies and inconsistencies of fighting capitalism by tools that install and advance the tendrils of capitalism.

Theoretically, Barassi's turns to economic anthropologist, David Graeber, to analyse how the activists of her study cope with contradiction of fighting capitalism with digital tools that advance it. In 2002, Graeber convincingly argued that what constitutes 'value' cross-culturally cannot be reduced to merely fiscal economics but is tied to a more complex cosmology of meaning-making. Therefore, to understand how the anti-capitalist activists reconcile the surveillance and exploitation of their data and activist activities, Barassi argues that 'digital labour' should be reconceptualised away from a 'rationalist/reductive economist paradigm' (ibid. 15), because value is not only reducible to monetary exchange but constitutes something more abstract and profound; that is, the social values of a group or individual and *what they deem to be valuable* (Graeber, 2002). By situating the digital labour of activists beyond the neo capitalist production of data to be turned into a commodity (see Couldry & Mejia, 2019), and observing what the activists deem valuable, Barassi reconciles how anti-capitalist activists manage the inherent tension of using digital tools that exist in and promote systems of economic capital.

Graeber's theory of value is helpful for how I understand the efficacy of digital capital. In Sri Lanka, digital capital appears to hold great intrinsic value to the ordinary social media users because of the historic and ongoing breakdowns media freedoms in Sri Lanka. The story of Magdalena's and her partner who are threatened and forced to leave the country is a stark demonstration of the violence and abuse citizens are prone to in Sri Lanka. The fact that Magdalena had little access to digital capital may well be inconclusive as to why they were targeted by

government goons, but it does not appear remiss to make the conflation that a greater stockpile of digital capital may have insulated them from harm. Another example of the value of digital capital is Praseema's usage of her enormous stockpile of digital capital as a gift to me. Whilst unrequested, and the actual practice of selfie taking and a photo of us together made me quite uncomfortable, the material value of the act was significant as Magdalena entered my study. Even though Magdalena had limited digital capital, the value it holds in Sri Lankan society, elevate myself (and thanks to Praseema as I wince next to her in the photo), to be a person to trust and talk to about highly sensitive topics.

Beyond the violence suffered by Magdalena's partner due to their lack of digital capital, helping further conceptualise the intrinsic value of digital capital in Sri Lanka are the narratives in *Chapter 4* that portray digital capital as an indispensable commodity in the race for power during the Aragalaya protests. The Sri Lankan government's mobilisation of bad actors, including bots to fog the clarity of debate by dosing the #Aragalaya hashtag with thousands of tweets to render the hashtag an untenable site for legitimate protest, was a process of discreditation of influencer digital capital. Moreover, several of the information influencers of my study were violently hacked, such as Piyanka who had child pornography published from his Facebook and Instagram to effectively de-platform him, and Bosco who was being hacked as I was communicating with him across various platforms.

This chapter has been presented under the monograph's titular neologism, 'The Digital IRL' because a thorough examination of the meaning of the closely associated terms 'digital' and 'post digital' helped me think critically how the digital and the non-digital are less discreet than popularly inscribed. Having considered the post-digital as a more accurate descriptor, noting how it does not imply a disenchantment with digital technologies but rather an acceptance of their ubiquity, we might move

beyond overemphasising the digital in all its everyday mundanity and toward recognition of its relationship with how power is reproduced and resisted. Post-digital has differing implications for how we perceive three important dimensions of my study, digital activism, digital ethnography and digital capital, because the post digital implies a paradoxical stop/start between digital and non-digital. In *Chapter 6*, I suggested that the 'The Digital IRL may appear to be a contradiction in terms', but the real contradiction is how the digital has been broadly conceived and marketed to us as cloud based and 'frictionless'. By stapling the IRL into how we conceive the digital or post-digital, we are less likely to overlook the real-world effects and entanglements of digital technologies.

8.0 | Where to next? Sri Lanka, the Future of Social Media and How We Study It

8.1 | Introduction

It has been widely reported that 2024 marks a pivotal year for democracy worldwide as more than 50 countries and over 1.5 billion people go to the electoral polls, including four of the world's five largest countries, India, USA, Indonesia and Pakistan. Due to the democratic backsliding, at the beginning of the year, the expected elections in Sri Lanka were only listed as 'tentative' in the Kings College London (2024) 'Poll to Poll' report, but in July, the Sri Lankan presidential elections were confirmed for 21st September 2024. Sri Lanka has undergone dramatic and significant political upheaval since the last presidential election in 2019 which saw the return to power of the Rajapaksa regime. A toxic mix of the COVID:19 pandemic and endemic government corruption led the country to the brink of collapse in 2022, and the Aragalaya protests were a response that galvanised a newly politicised and empowered population, leading to the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and the subsequent power grab by incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe in July 2022. Considering 'Ranil' was not democratically elected by the populace and remains deeply unpopular with large factions of the Aragalaya protestors, to say the forthcoming elections are hotly anticipated would be an understatement. A record 39 candidates are running for president (Aljareeza, 2024). Along with incumbent Ranil, who has previously served six terms as prime minister, Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (United People's Front) and Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are front-runners. The Rajapaksa clan are pitching a return

to power via Namal, the slick 38-year-old son of Mahinda and nephew of Gotabaya, who I briefly introduced in *Chapter 3* via his interactions on Twitter with Siri and his promise to set up a special task force to protect women from sexual harassment. In addition to the usual raft of party contenders, two Buddhist monks are running for president, one of whom is ‘calling for the legalisation of cannabis and a ban on birth control.’ (Aljazeera, 2024, para 16)

Since I completed my fieldwork in April 2023, media freedoms in Sri Lanka have continued to be put under intense strain. According to Freedom House’s 2023 Sri Lanka report, several social media users have been intimidated or assaulted in connection with their online content. In May 2023, for example, ‘a prominent social media activist was attacked with machetes in broad daylight’ by an ally of the Rajapaksas (Perera, 2023, para 1). Moreover, in January 2024, under the provision of increasing public security and fighting cybercrime, the government passed the Online Safety Bill. The new legislation has been widely criticised as a tool to suppress dissent, especially in the run up to the elections, and has motivated over 50 human rights organisations globally to request the Sri Lanka Ministry of Public Security to withdraw the proposed bill and present a revised version (ARTICLE 19, 2024).

Thankfully, despite the threat of violence and the challenges of operating in a political sphere with shrinking media freedoms, all the research participants of my study have been safe from harm, and some have obtained valuable positions and opportunities in media and politics. The climate activist, Valli, has spoken at Human Rights conferences internationally and won awards for her conservationism, and Siri is studying at a US college thanks to a well-deserved bursary. Given how I have come to work closely and greatly admire several of these individuals, I could say they were always destined for great things, but given they were born into a country in the midst of a generational civil war, and then

experienced the extraordinary circumstances of 2022 with Sri Lanka on the brink of collapse, their journeys' have not been anything but straightforward. Moreover, as I have argued throughout this monograph, their highly active and nuanced social media practice has seen them accumulate significant stockpiles of digital capital which must be seen as a contributing factor to their continued progress and success, and, perhaps, even safety. Their large following on social media also means they are emergent voices of influence in the forthcoming elections and several of my closest research participants, including Lahiru and Valli, are using their platforms to advocate for a win for the National People's Power (NPP), a coalition of left-wing parties that includes the JVP, the political party implicated in Marxist student movement of the 1970s and 1980s that ended in extraordinary ultraviolence. Critics say the NPP are merely the JVP hiding in new clothes, but NPP's primary objectives of renationalising major industries and investing in public services are popular once more, especially amongst the Sri Lankan youth.

Notwithstanding the controversy around the Online Safety Bill, how media freedoms will fair in Sri Lanka's 2024 elections is unclear, but commentators are anticipating that generative AI will enter the fray (Hattotuwa, 2024). Political forecasters in Sri Lanka tend to look to India for inspiration for emergent socio-political phenomena, but during India's presidential election of June 2024 which saw Narendra Modi win as expected, synthetic media, as generative AI is also commonly known, was not as devastating as many predicted (Christopher, 2024). For example, one political party's media team used synthetic media to 'resurrect' the deceased father of a politician running for local election, himself a popular former member of Parliament, to produce a campaign video where the resurrected father extolled 'the virtues of his son' (Dutt, 2024, para 6). Whilst certainly bizarre, this eccentric use of generative AI does not demonstrate a new form of egregious disinformation or reflect a total demise of the public sphere that many had expected or feared. Following

India's example, my instinct is to suggest that 'Gen AI' in the Sri Lankan elections may veer its freakish head, but only via equally unpredictable content typologies. I suspect the biggest concern of freedom of expression in Sri Lanka remains the accessibility of social media and its usefulness as a site of protest and reliable information exchange. How has the global social media ecosystem developed since my fieldwork excursion, and how will this impact the future of Sri Lanka's media freedoms?

In July 2023, appropriately nine months after Twitter was acquired, Elon Musk announced on the platform that he owned the reason why he had changed the name of the platform from Twitter to 'X'⁶. What he envisioned was a radical transformation in the way Twitter/X would be used by everyday users:

'Twitter was acquired by X Corp both to ensure freedom of speech and as an accelerant for X, the everything app. The Twitter name made sense when it was just 140-character messages going back and forth – like birds tweeting – but now you can post almost anything, including several hours of video. In the months to come, we will add comprehensive communications and the ability to conduct your entire financial world. The Twitter name does not make sense in that context, so we must bid adieu to the bird.'
(Musk, 2023)

Elon Musk, thus, envisages the creation of an 'everything app' that can provide a plethora of services well beyond the dialogical communications of generic social media platforms. Via the implementation of financial services into Twitter/X, thereby allowing businesses and consumers to interact without the need for third-party arbitration, Musk imagines all manner of activities being coordinated through his platform. Given Musk's

⁶ For the remainder of this final chapter, to avoid confusion, I will refer to the platform as 'Twitter/X'.

penchant for extraordinary hyperbole and hubris, perhaps it is needless to say, more than one year after his announcement, there has not been a murmur since about Twitter/X's expansion into financial services and the development of *the everything app*. However, what Musk proposes is not out of the realms of possibility as there is a readymade model to intimate in China's most widespread mobile application, WeChat. Ethnographer of digital technology in China, Gabriele de Seta, argues that WeChat has become an essential 'infrastructure' for life in China because WeChat not only offers exemplary dialogical communication services but 'locks both users and third parties into the platform's transactional logic' by integrating myriad adjacent goods and services directly into the platforms' user experience (de Seta, 2020, 77). Outside of China, everyday mobile utilities such as accommodation (Airbnb), food delivery (Deliveroo) and taxi (Uber) are organised through private business applications, but in China these services are built directly into the WeChat platform creating its infrastructural reputation. Due to this extraordinary dependency, de Seta also considers the boundless surveillance potential of WeChat. Like social media platforms elsewhere, WeChat is free to access, but because users must register with their private information including bank details, phone number and official ID, little room for privacy is left between the user and the corporate developers, TenCent, the Chinese state, and affiliated third party organisations.

While there are no signs of the profound shift to Musk's 'the everything app', or what might be more helpfully articulated as 'the WeChat model', changes are afoot at Twitter/X.

To save on financial overheads, one of Musk's first moves post-acquisition was to sack entire departments related to ethics and accountability at unimaginable costs to user safety and information quality. In addition, as Musk's promised in his tweet (sorry 'X' above), the communications' services of Twitter/X are evolving as long-form video is afforded to paid

users. Indeed, the paid-subscription model of Twitter/X perhaps demonstrates one of the most obvious developments since Musk's acquisition, providing 'verified' users the ability to edit posts, publish longer textual and video posts, and, rather opaquely, rank higher in search results. Anecdotally, when using the platform in the past year, I have noticed the content genres have evolved too, becoming more Tik-Tok esque, or, in other words, hyper targeted, short-form video-content designed to drain attention. Another significant shift has been in the user base. Over a million people, many academics, artists and activists from the political left, who disagree with Musk's brazen neoliberalism and threat to reduce a trusted public space for information exchange into a playground of corporate advertising, clickbait and fake news, have made a mass exodus of Twitter/X in protest (Nicholas, 2023). In the initial three months of Musk's takeover, many early leavers migrated to Mastodon, an emergent mode of social media modelled on the fediverse. The fediverse is a conglomeration of Decentralised Online Social Networks (DOSNs) that offer very similar socio-technical affordances as Twitter, but they are ideologically different insofar as, unlike Twitter/X and the majority of mainstream platforms which are privately owned and conceal their code between litigious intellectual property agreements, DOSNs, such as Mastodon, are open-source software allowing any user to set up their own *de-centralised* server. While DOSN users can build their own communities, each server is built on the same technical specifications therefore allowing for user and server interoperability, creating a federation model of independent servers communicative to one another (La Cava, Greco & Tagarelli, 2022).

Mastodon is not shy in explicitly mimicking the user interface and user experience of Twitter/X, therefore encouraging seamless migration to users previously adept at Twitter/X and not wanting to learn a new system of functionality. Published posts are called 'toots', and the famous Twitter/X function of a retweet is called a 'boost'. The major difference between

Mastodon and Twitter/X is how the community organises content moderation and acceptable modes of behaviours. Not dissimilar to Reddit and its user moderated subreddits, Mastodon server moderators set a server's thematic interest and the rules of engagement between users, outlining behaviour protocols that if breached may result in banning. Twitter/X also publishes terms and conditions for decency and inappropriate behaviour, but the algorithmic systems that administer content moderation are opaque, and their ideological politics are unknown, creating the mysterious phenomenon of shadow banning (Cotter, 2023). Moreover, the algorithmic moderation systems of the major platforms are becoming increasingly aggressive at removing contentious content because national regulatory laws, such as the UK's Online Safety Act 2023, which Sri Lanka's Online Safety Bill is clearly based upon, threaten to impose significant financial sanctions on platforms if they do not remove egregious content within 24 hours of posting. It is safe to suspect that the (small) shift to human-operated DOSN's and other small platforms may well be a desire for engagement with content and communities not moderated by artificial intelligence lacking in morality and accountability, and to engage in political discourse unimpeded by legislations laws.

In *Chapter 6* I described a focus group I hosted with Sri Lankans interested in the state of Twitter/X as a legitimate place for political participation. During the conversation, I asked the guests about their views on the platform now Elon Musk is in charge and the shift we are seeing in the West to smaller platforms such as Mastodon. When I queried, would they consider a similar migration? Hiri stepped in and claimed that those in Sri Lanka do not have the 'luxury' of those in the West of being able to choose which platform to communicate on. His view was that Sri Lankans only use Twitter/X (and Instagram and Facebook) because they are the most popular globally and using lesser platforms therefore does not make sense. In Hiri's argument, 'the network effect' is not only a technical

procedure that encourages users onto a platform and locks them there because a high number of users equates to high value but operates in reverse as a restrictive process that determines the limited take up or slow shift to lesser or newer platforms. Following Musk's heavy-handed takeover of Twitter/X and the initial excitement about Mastodon being an ethical alternative in the West, the fediverse based platform has seen a steady plateauing of user numbers, suggesting that the irreversibility of the network effect is not only rooted in the Global South's under-privilege to take up new platforms, but it is more of a global state of affairs.

In February 2024, *The Guardian* reported that the use of Twitter/X in the US has 'slumped by more than a fifth since Elon Musk bought the site and rebranded it to X' (Hern, 2024 1). Twitter/X's 20% drop in daily usage can be interpreted as crisis for a platform with bold plans of monopolising the marketplace, but it is important to note that the other major social media platforms also saw a reduction in users' numbers, only less dramatic. A 10% downturn on TikTok user numbers and a less than 5% drop-off on both Meta-owned platforms seems to suggest that the social media explosion is beginning to taper off. What is motivating this change in social media habits (in western nations at least)? In the case of Twitter/X, an obvious answer may be found in Musk himself, whose politics and rhetoric are astoundingly problematic. In November 2023, he used his newly acquired platform to 'like' an antisemitic rant by a fellow user, and in August 2024 he suggested 'civil war' in the UK was inevitable due to migration. The shift away from mainstream platforms is more widespread than Twitter/X-only, however, and as a recent *New York Times* article suggested, civic dissatisfaction with the big five platforms perhaps lies in their relentless drive to commercialisation and pursuit of profit. 'Social medias have become a whole less social', writes technology writer, Brian Chen, as 'Facebook, TikTok and Twitter seem to be increasingly connecting users with brands and influencers', and thus, 'to restore a sense of community, some users are trying smaller social networks; (Chen, 2023, 1). Indeed,

what are we seeing is a defection to smaller, provincial social media for a range of reasons and preferences. Social media users are increasingly seeking out specific platforms to connect with specific types of communities. For example, for gaming culture people are heading go to Discord, for conversations on film, Letterboxd is the application, and for the LGBTQA community in the Persian Gulf, it's Ahwaa. If highly personalised interests are not the motivation, then politics is increasingly a driver of platform-preference. Mastodon as described above is an attractive alternative to Twitter/X for those on the political left, whilst people with right-wing tendencies are finding homes on platforms normally described as 'fringe'. In the recent UK riots, *Politico* reports that far-rights actors are organising on Telegram, Odessey and Bitchute (Clarke, 2024), and in the US, the xenophobic and INCEL cultures once notorious on fringe message board 4chan are becoming normalised on the new Donald Trump-owned platform, Truth Social, and various others. And this shift is not only a phenomenon restricted to highly developed countries of the Global North. In India, religious majoritarian voices are shifting to homegrown apps, Koo and ShareChat, that operate in various local vernaculars, demonstrating the shift to more localised services that cater for specific non-global communities. Similarly, in Kenya, extreme speech is proliferating on IMO, Likee and Vskit that offer local vernacular alternatives to standard global platforms (Udupa, 2021). Other socio-technical factors are motivating platform migration too. In 2023, BeReal become one of the fast-growing platforms as young people flocked to share one photo a day to release the photo shared by the friends in their network. Despite becoming an overnight hit, BeReal's lack of alternative functionality meant it was only a fleeting fad and has been haemorrhaging user numbers since. But the notion of brevity that BeReal offered is emerging as an appealing asset of alternative social medias in contradiction to the endless 'doom-strolling' of the mainstream platforms. For example, on Minus, users can only publish 100 posts in their lifetime, creating a platform that values quality

over quantity, and promotes content and interaction as something precious and to be savoured.

It is difficult to anticipate what do these contemporary developments in global social media ecosystem mean for political participation in Sri Lanka. However, what these changes could entail for the anthropology of social media is a boarder question that this final concluding chapter is primed to consider. By arguing that anthropologists have much to gain by exploring the increasing platformisation of cultural production through the prisms of digital capital and augmented ethnography, the next section will first review how digital capital has been shown to be efficacious in the study of social media and influencers culture, but as *the everything app* aspirations of Elon Musk demonstrate, digital capital may also have further heuristic value across gig economy platforms as the logics of datafication continue to infiltrate existing and emerging sites of cultural production and consumption. In addition, the innovation of augmented ethnography to reappropriate big data into the ethnographic method is illustrated to be, while demonstrably useful, perhaps under threat in a platform era dominated by profit-seeking corporations who are restricting research access to their API and data services to save reputational damage. Nevertheless, new opportunities are evolving in an increasingly datafied world and the popularity of small platforms and fediverse-style open-source accessibility which is ripe for data extraction. The monograph has been presented in six preceding chapters that comprise the independent dimensions of my study, 1) media, 2) people, 3) data, 4) platforms, 5) place, and 6) practice, and the penultimate section will briefly summarise various debates touched upon in these chapters. In the final section, I will consider the limitations of my study, suggesting the inauguration of digital capital may well be more productively explored in dialectical conversation with Bourdieu's wider ontological oeuvre thereby encompassing digital habitus and nascent *digital* fields.

8.2 | Anthropology and Digital Capital

Anthropology and social media are seemingly incongruous because they move at such different speeds. The discipline of social anthropology began with the longitudinal study of small-scale 'traditional' societies, often regarded as without history and slow to change or progress, whereas social media implies instantaneous communication awash with the novel, ephemeral and amorphous. Anthropology relies on deep immersion in the native field site, rich analysis, and the production of thick description; social media, on the other hand, can be reducible to tweets, memes and emojis. Is it fair to say that the anthropological approach to studying social medias has been relatively slow given the extraordinary take up of social media globally and its pervasive role in the production of culture? Perhaps, the reason anthropologists often ignore the platformisation of culture in their research is, I suspect, because they are ill-prepared for approaching the 'black boxes' of digital culture and the analytical shift required to consider a research subject through the prism of opaque algorithmic systems, reality-defying filters and lens, and asynchronous temporalities. However, given the enormous global take up of social media worldwide—the biggest US platform, Facebook, has nearly 3 billion users and WeChat, the largest Chinese platform, has appropriately 1.3 billion users, signalling that the vast majority of the world's adult population has some sort of engagement with either platform—I suggest that it is becoming increasingly difficult to study a cultural phenomenon and not come into contact with its platformisation.

Above, I detailed some of the changes happening and expected in the world of social media to give space to consider how we as anthropologists may approach this seemingly fragmenting and unpredictable cultural phenomena and field site. This monograph has explored the widespread

proliferation of social media in Sri Lanka, and one of the primary questions it has sought to answer is, how does social media afford activism in a highly volatile media sphere? Another is, what does this mean for the anthropological study of social media? I have attempted to provide answers by long term fieldwork with Sri Lankans on social media and people in Sri Lanka who use social media for political participation. The outcome is a theoretical framework for the broad study of social media and, specifically, for the way influence manifests on social media platforms that may well have far reaching affects for how we consider social media in the next 5-10 years in the face of its unpredictable evolution. The theoretical framework that I offer is couched in two emergent concepts: digital capital and augmented ethnography. Both conceptual ideas have been used sparingly in recent scholarship, but my study advances their potential by grounding them in multimodal fieldwork and in concert with the emerging field of the anthropology of social media. Indeed, while digital capital is the object and subject of augmented ethnography, they are not mutually exclusive and digital capital can be analysed and extrapolated independently, and so too can augmented ethnography.

The foundation of my theoretical framework is that the internet buzzword of social media 'influence' is equitable to 'digital capital'; what I identify as the visible datafication of a social media user's follower count. Contributing to accumulation and exchange of digital capital is the ubiquitous datafication of all social media interactions in the material form of likes, comments and emojis. Taking cue from internet scholar danah boyd who identified that the design feature that defines social networking sites from previous medias is the ability for all users to observe and 'traverse' other's users' networks, I contend that this highly visible but seemingly innocuous feature of platform culture underpins the way social media affords the accumulation and exchange of influence. For the active social media user, the datafication of their engagement implies how

successful their social media practice and performance is, and this data is tacitly inculcated in the user to reproduce behaviours likely to sustain and increase digital capital accumulation. Even for the novice social media user who is not consciously trying to acquire digital capital, the practice and performance of using social media triggers this datafied process because platforms are designed to do it; thus, digital capital is an inescapable condition of social media. The datafication of user networks is what defines digital capital and makes it distinct from symbolic capital IRL, underpinning why we need a new designation to describe the importance of social media influence in our current milieu.

Regardless of whether Musk succeeds or fails in his vision to turn Twitter/X into 'the everything app', my reconceptualization of how digital capital functions as an ethnographic heuristic could become valuable beyond traditional social media. Musk's plans to offer products and services through Twitter/X only reflects the wider platformisation of culture into myriad areas of production and consumption. Thus, I suggest digital capital may well be purposefully repositioned as a condition of usage on existing platforms and applications. Do shoppers on Amazon, holidaymakers on Airbnb or daters on Tinder accumulate and exchange digital capital? I suspect so. I also posit that the digital capital framework could be usefully applied to burgeoning cohort of precarious gig economy workers. Bonini and Trere's (2024) try to show how the platform dynamics and algorithmic logics of social media are increasingly reproduced on gig-economy apps such as taxi and food delivery services. In their book 'Algorithms of Resistance', the authors define algorithmic resistance as a performative act conducted by gig-economy workers, who from a subaltern position, try to respond to the power of algorithmic decision-making through novel processes. What does gig worker economies look like if we consider their in-app datafication as digital capital? Does a high accumulation of digital capital on uber, for example, limit or improve the drivers' options of algorithmic resistance? Furthermore, as monetization

becomes more prevalent across the platform mix, it may be valuable to consider how digital capital interacts with economic capital. Extant research on influencers, which tends to focus on labour and political economy of social media performance, could be refined by a sharper focus on the how and why datafication of influence creates money. Many of my research participants resisted monetising in the lifestyle influencer tradition because selling products and services in homemade advertorial content was seen as uncool or an abuse of their influence and political power. However, some of my closest colleagues have taken on interesting and profound job opportunities since, which I am sure is directly related to the digital capital they accrued through their political content and especially during the aragalaya when interest in activists' lives was at its fullest. Bosco, for example, has become a journalist for an established newspaper in Colombo, and Lahiru embarked on one month university tour of the UK to tell the story of the Aragalaya. How digital capital and economic capital interact therefore is more complex than embedding adverts in content, and the implicit connection between the two should be explored more thoroughly, and across myriad settings.

Digital capital is more than a theoretical lens because it was a material commodity I actively pursued and accumulated in order to gather a deep understanding of how social media functions (beyond many years of idly using platforms and having them use me!) and to build trust and respect amongst a highly sensitive community of Sri Lankan activists. My training at the University of Helsinki, upskilling in technical computation methods and visually alluring graphics, granted me a stockpile of digital capital that opened doors and helped me understand the day-to-day lives of my informants and their relationship with social media. I predict that other ethnographers, interested in cultural phenomenon also mediated through platform logics may have to adopt similar and diverse methods to increase their digital capital stakes to gain visibility and understanding of platform's functionally and obtain consent amongst their community of interest.

Presumably, the visibility labour that the ethnographer interested in TikTok lifestyle influencers in Singapore is very different to the visibility labour I conducted which revolved around satirical political content on Sri Lanka. Thus, not only does digital capital emerge as a critical element in repertoire of the contemporary (digital) anthropologist, but the performance of how we acquire digital capital becomes the mode of how we conduct ethnography.

8.3 | Data and Augmented Ethnography

In the social sciences and humanities, data has several distinctions. Primary data, collected through ethnography and other sociological methods is data collected for the express intention of research, while secondary data is originally collected for other purposes—for example, a national census is conducted for governance—but is then reappropriated by scholars (Bjerre-Nielsen and Glavind, 2022). Another data distinction is between surface data and deep data; the former relating to information collected about a broad demographic and relevant to statistical analysis in fields such as sociology and economics, while the later, quintessential to anthropology, is 'deep' because it comprises a large body of information about only a handful of individuals or a small community. The main data of my study is 'primary' and 'deep' in that it encompasses the lives and experiences of 20 specific individuals I identified as being information influencers in the Sri Lankan media-sphere. In addition, my study incorporates big data, which could be euphemised as 'tertiary' in the first categorisation because big data is perpetually generated by social media interactions without apparent causation. In the second categorisation above, big data could be considered 'superdeep' because it is both superficial, encompassing large statistic volumes, and precise, comprised of microdetails such as timestamped speech. Thus, my study sets to make

a signification contribution by bridging together disparate data typologies: primary and tertiary, deep and superdeep. However, the marriage of ethnographic data and big data is not a happy house where 'Quant meets Qual' for a holistic measure of how social media is used for political participation in Sri Lanka. No, the outcome is more nuanced insofar as what emerges is a methodological reimagining of how we engage ethnographic research participants in the analysis and deconstruction of big data. I call this practice, 'augmented ethnography'.

I define augmented ethnography as the patchwork approach of combining datafied, digital and in person modalities for a richer ethnographic experience. In the conclusion to the book, 'Activism on the Web', Veronica Barassi argues that to 'deconstruct the technological hype around big data we need at first to critically question the claims that are made today about the 'accuracy' and importance of big data in society' (Barassi, 2015, 139). In some ways, my study has been a response to this call. The first imperative to the augmented ethnographic approach is the acceptance of our post-digital existence, and the sense that life, place and practice are neither digital nor non-digital but tethered together. For example, I understand that a photo of me and several of my research participants on a trip to Jaffna posted on Instagram *is* a photo of me and several of my research participants on a trip to Jaffna. The two components are intrinsically linked and should be examined as such. The second is the understanding that due to the technological advancements installed in a post-pandemic world, an alternative methodological option, for example, a video-based focus group, is not only contingency for pandemic restrictions but may well be preferential for the research objective at hand. When a digital or datafied approach is chosen by the ethnographer it is not simply because in-person modalities are restricted, but there a commonsense understanding that only through a collaboration of methods can we really begin to comprehend the complexity of a social

world organized by data, presented through a screen, and experienced in the body.

Inspired by an unpublished, pre-pandemic paper (Pohjonen, 2020), augmented ethnography utilises an increasingly popular, but vague term as the digital appears to intensify or further 'augment' our social world and experience. Readers may be more familiar with 'augmented reality' or 'AR', an emergent technological phenomenon where computer-generated graphics are made visible IRL to enhance real world experience (see Greenfield, 2017). Popularised by the global mobile video game, *Pokémon Go*, augmented reality is being used in myriad alternative settings such as in medical care to train doctors, but it remains a fringe technology. Hampered by the need for impervious wireless internet connectivity and a lack of commercial developments in wearable technology, specifically, glasses, AR may still feel like a nascent technology, but the term 'augment' continues to proliferate and has already entered the anthropological imagination. In a recent article, Luna and Balasescu muse on the potential of an 'augmented anthropology', exploring and speculating 'on the one hand if and how robots could gather data and perform anthropological studies, and on the other hand how humans would react to a robot ethnographer.' (Luna & Balasescu, 2024, 1) Semantically, 'augmented' means 'to make something greater by adding to it' (Collins Dictionary, 2024), and the two examples of 'augmented reality' and 'augmented anthropology' demonstrate the wide breadth of how 'augmented' is being broadly applied. Nevertheless, the two examples also illustrate the presupposition and obsession with technological advancements that are not widely available, or yet to even exist. Thus, my vision for an augmented ethnography is less speculative, departing from augmented reality's dependency on unviable internet connectivity and expensive headsets, and augmented anthropology's hypothetical, uncertain robotic future. Rather, I have constructed augmented ethnography to be firmly rooted in the material data plus digital and everyday processes that converge to

organise contemporary social life. Put simply, augmented ethnography begins from the starting off point that if we combine the three essential elements of contemporary life in our ethnographic practice, we might make ethnography *greater by adding to it*.

Anthropologist Antonia Walford (2021) says the true value of data is in its 'potential' which is seemingly untapped, but the future of augmented ethnography is not straightforward because of digital data's growing economic and political potential is seeing data become increasingly difficult to access as major platforms move to a post-API environment (Pariah et al., 2020). My study incorporated big data legally extracted via the Twitter API through the official Academic Developer Portal. Notwithstanding a stringent vetting purpose, the access I was granted, beginning in April 2022, was a free-of-charge methodological doorway allowing university-affiliated researchers to access Twitter/X data for academic research. However, since acquiring Twitter/X, Elon Musk has put access to the Academic Developer Portal behind a paywall for an extraordinary cost of \$5,000 a month. Presumably, this is outside of the budget of most scholars and many university departments, thus the ramifications will likely be a near-total curtailment of studies incorporating Twitter/X data. This shift to platform opacity imitates the lead of Meta who have prohibited access to their Facebook and Instagram APIs following Edward Snowden's 2015 revelations that indicted Facebook in widespread citizen surveillance. Since Meta platforms' move to research-obscure almost ten years ago, there have been a disproportionate number of studies based on Twitter/X because the API was accessible to researchers. But now Twitter/X has followed Meta platforms into the data-wilderness, studies using Twitter/X data, like my research on political participation in Sri Lanka, will be difficult to emulate using the same protocols.

All is not lost, however. 'In principle,' claim Pariah, Birnbak and Freeman, 'anything that can be seen in a web browser can be scraped given sufficient

coding skill.’ (Pariah, Birkbak and Freeman, 2020, 284) Moreover, our ability to access social media data evolves as the social media landscape continues to transform and fragment. TikTok, the world’s fastest-growing platform, has recently started offering academic research access to their API, therefore resisting the turn to a post-API world, allowing for the protocols of augmented ethnography to take place on TikTok. In addition, if the continued fragmentation of social media users and communities into smaller, niche platforms and applications continues, perhaps we can expect more accessible APIs for data extraction. Fediverse-based platforms are open source by design, and as DSONS grow in popularity, they will demand more scholarly attention. Moreover, technical university departments and private companies are increasingly building data scraping tools for platform data extraction. The University of Amsterdam’s Digital Methods Initiative (DMI), for example, have developed an open-access tool, 4CAT, that can extract data using Python code from a host of platforms including 4chan, Telegram and Tumblr. In addition, DMI’s Zeeschumer scraper can also interact with Douyin, the platform available in China that TikTok is modelled on, plus numerous fringe platforms renowned for meme and right-wing cultures including Igmar, Parler and Truth Social. Private company, Quilt.ai, are a startup based in Singapore and they have built, Sphere, a machine learning algorithm that has interoperability with most of the world’s most popular platforms, including Instagram, Twitter and TikTok. During my PhD research, I came to collaborate with both the DMI and Quilt for different research purposes, and these experiences helped train me in developing my datafied approach and advance augmented ethnography beyond Pohjonen’s initial formation.

8.4 | A General Summary of My Study

On the one hand, in this monograph, I have considered the ethnographic tensions that emerged in the encounter between being a highly visible Sri Lankan activist on social media in a media sphere notorious for its restriction of media freedoms, the proliferation of disinformation, and state-sponsored violence against dissenters. On the other hand, I have considered the lure and demands of widespread influencer culture on social media and how the accumulation and exchange of digital capital affects and contributes to how activists politically participate. I introduced the concept of ‘information influencer’ to bridge these persistent tensions and make a departure from the overused and ambiguous concept of ‘digital activist’, and although I strongly suspect that the cultural phenomena I witnessed cannot be reduced to the tension between activists and influencers, I do believe this is a significant scholarly contribution of my study to the broad conception of how the platformisation of culture is transforming widespread cultural phenomena. The theoretical framework that evolved out of focusing on the structural tensions between activist motivations for political participation despite the visceral and ever-presence danger, and the opportunities available to activists via the technical affordances of social media platforms, created a way of seeing activity on social media as a mechanism for accruing and legitimising real world influence. The practice of digital capital accumulation and exchange therefore is as widespread as social media and may be helpfully applied to understand the motivations of social media users everywhere.

After the broad stroke *Introduction* to the three key terms of the monograph, *Chapter 2* began with a short vignette of my touchdown in Sri Lanka for ethnographic fieldwork and how the blind expectation that my UK sim card would be interoperable with Sri Lanka’s internet connectivity left me to deal with initial transport and money exchanges through face-to-face barter economics. Without access to digital mediation, I reflected on the failure of my augmented experience that left me somewhere between the old and the new. This led to a broad contextual overview of the Sri

Lankan nation state's political history through literature on media studies, that also imbibed on my time as a journalist in Sri Lanka. The importance of this overview cannot be overstated for readers unfamiliar with Sri Lanka's tumultuous post-colonial history. The 'island paradox' characterization serves to emphasize the inherent contradictions of an emerging nation that has simultaneously balanced the meeting of extraordinary development goals, including leading the way in South Asian statistics on health and education, and one of the most violent civil wars in modern history. A backdrop to the devastating violence was the egregious control of the media sphere in Sri Lanka through a mix of state ownership of centralised media systems and oppressive laws and regulations *and* extreme violence against critical journalists. The outcome of this state oppression on media freedoms has been a dearth of quality information, resulting in an inability for truth and justice to be sought since the end of the long bloody civil war in 2009. The proliferation of widespread internet since the end of the civil war has presented conflicting opportunities for oppression but also pockets of hope and democratic potential. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has increased in the post-war years, enabled by internet technologies, and the violent state has shifted its loathing to the minority Muslim community, motivating a string of anti-Muslim riots. In 2019, ten years after the end of the civil war against the LTTE, the devastating Easter Sunday Attacks on Christian churches and Western hotels killed over 250 people. Organised by an Islamic State-affiliated group inside Sri Lanka, the complexity and fragility of Sri Lanka ethnic-relations was placed on the world stage. The control of social media in these moments of ultra-violence through state-organised internet shutdowns emphasises the importance of media freedoms in accounting for accurate information, and the potential for post-conflict reconciliation as facts on the riots and the bombings have gone unreported. Following the Easter Sunday Attacks, a paranoid and disaffected Sinhalese majority re-elected the warlord leaders, brothers Gotabaya and Mahinda Rajapaksa back into power, and through the societal lockdowns installed by COVID-

19, the Rajapaksa regime oversaw a backsliding on Sri Lanka's democratic traditions. In reaction to government corruption that led the country to the brink of collapse with a severe shortage of basic foods, medicines and fuel, the Aragalaya emerged in 2022. A peaceful, cross cultural people's protest, the Aragalaya became one of the defining moments of a generation as their demands for 'system change' saw the resignation of both Rajapaksa's from office.

In *Chapter 3* I suggest the socio-political threads explored in the *Chapter 2* coalesce to produce the conditions for the emergence of information influencers in the Sri Lankan social media sphere, especially on Twitter but also on Facebook and Instagram, the three most popular platforms in Sri Lanka. However, while I have argued that information influencers appear to have a special place in the Sri Lankan media sphere due to decades of state-sponsored violence against journalists creating a hostile environment where traditional news agencies are crippled by self-censorship and fear, making independent social media usage a primary resource for the circulation of information including anti-government criticism and pro-liberal values, in this chapter I charter the highly personal reasons as to why ordinary citizens strive to accrue digital capital and risk their safety and livelihood to speak out against oppression, fight for women and minority rights, advocate for environmentalism and widespread socialism. One of the motivations that emerges for accruing social media influence via political participation is the desire to reclaim the words 'influence' and 'influencer' from their popular usage around lifestyle influencers, underpinning my argument as to why we need more nuanced categories for influencers on social media, beginning with information influencers. In addition, I resist suggesting that the newly identified cohort of information influencers are unique to Sri Lanka. On the contrary, via digital capital accumulation, information influencers are likely to politically participate in numerous diverse and emergent settings, including other nations that have suffered egregious ethnic violence or media

suppression, but also other more 'developed' or stable nations, because social media more broadly is not a homogenizing force, but localized in dynamic and unpredictable ways. In line with the collaborative work of digital anthropologists who asked, How the world changed social media? (Miller et al, 2016) my study proposes information influencers as a cohort to be identified and studied in alternative media environments and cultures.

The two following chapters embrace the technical systems at play in my study but maintain a distinct commitment to ethnographic subjectivities. *Chapter 4* aims to demonstrate how a datafied approach to studying social media influence can help deconstruct digital data and potentially mobilize a decolonise perspective of how anthropology engages with big data. *Chapter 5* proposes affordance folklore as a new framework for understanding the complex and opaque processes of social media affordances and how this affects the relationships information influencers develop with the platform, their audience and themselves. Taken together, these ambitious arguments have the potential to significantly reduce the technical and conceptual barriers of how anthropology engages with big data and technological affordances. Depending on the specific research objectives, a decolonising approach to data that actively involves the datafied participants in the assessment of data's objectivity to infer multiple data realities could become a foundational practice for challenging the almost mythological qualities of data; that is, its 'aura of truth, objectivity and neutrality' (boyd & Crawford, 2012, 663). Likewise, by bridging digital folklore into how we think through affordances, empirical observations become less-matter-of fact, and closer to the highly subjective and contradictory relationships we users build with social media and other digital technologies.

In some ways, I am convinced, we all produce affordance folklore, that we all automatically make up attitudes and beliefs about the technologies that we regularly engage with because their inner workings are

incomprehensible to us, and we seek control over the outcomes they deliver. A bit like how Siri's believes that a quick profile picture update on her twitter profile will likely increase her engagement and help her meet her next milestone of 20,000 followers, in my own pursuit of visibility through participant observation on twitter, I started to develop folkloric attitude on how to improve my social media engagement. Moreover, like Nala who relies on her cousin to help her navigate technical affordances, I even started to ask people who I respected in the Sri Lankan Twittersphere to help build my own affordance folklore. For example, I was feeling confused about the time zone difference between where I was posting in the UK and where I was intended to be seen in Sri Lanka, convincing myself that the time I posted would be instrumental in how much engagement I would receive. As our researcher-subject relationship developed to informal chatting via text, I remember asking Lahiru, what time is it best time to post my content for maximum engagement? He replied saying between 5-7pm is the best time as people are commuting or finishing work and idly using their smartphones and strolling social media. It almost sounds foolish to admit, but I developed a posting schedule based on Sri Lanka's rush hour, posting content around lunchtime GMT in order to maximise my visibility and help achieve my goal of ingratiating myself into the Sri Lankan political debate on Twitter/X. However, as much as Lahiru's knowledge of Twitter/X is deep and valuable, his experience was based on managing tens of thousands of followers and being a Sri Lankan in Sri Lanka. My parameters, with only 400 followers, based in London and with only a handful of IRL connections in Sri Lanka who might support my content, were entirely different. Still, his folklore became my folklore.

All of the chapters of the monograph contribute to the conceptualization of the monograph's titular characterisation, 'The Digital IRL'. For example, the final remarks in *Chapter 5 conclude that the components that constitute affordance folklore are not only practices based on social media experience, rather, they are also developed through entanglements with*

sociopolitical context IRL, such as Nala's folklore that the social media abuse she receives has increased since Rajapaksa came back to public office in 2019. But *Chapter 6* and *Chapter 7* are both presented under 'The Digital IRL' delineation because they both most clearly demonstrate the dismantling of the distinction between the digital spaces and IRL. The objective of *Chapter 6* is to advance the conceptual discussions about the place of ethnography and make the proposition that in an increasingly digitally-hybrid social reality where 'outside' occurrences can have sudden and dramatic epochal shifts in the everyday lives of our research subjects, the ethnographic site should be less considered as an arbitrary location, but closer to an arbitrary sequence of events that it is up to the ethnographer to synthesis into a coherent assemblage of meaning. *Chapter 7* works hard at critiquing the concept of the digital and its ideological framing as something remote, cloud based and frictionless. To do so, I lean into the emergent concept of the post-digital to emphasis the material infrastructures that make the digital possible, plus the etymological origin of digital and the notion that digital is something experienced through touch and the body. As is often the case with good ethnography, it is chance encounters that seem to reveal the most, and the case example of Magdalena, whom, upon seeing a photo on Instagram of myself and lifestyle influencer, Praseema, ignited a conversation that adds interesting complexity to how digital capital is theorised through the monograph, and potentially beyond. By granting me important insight into the lives of activists without digital capital for the first time, the potential for digital capital affording information influencers insulation from violence and terror is tabled. By reflecting on this development, I recognize that doing more ethnography with *ordinary* activists who did not have a large social media following may well have potentially revealed deeper fissures about the efficacy of digital capital and it how it affects social life IRL, but it may also have been dangerous given the suggestion of violence.

8.5 | The Limits of My Study

This monograph has sought to make significant advancements in digital anthropology and broader scholarship on activism, influencers, social media and computational methods in the social sciences. There are limitations to my study and in this final section, I would like to reflect on the constraints and what may have been different.

As an ethnographer of social media my focus was to investigate how activists in Sri Lanka amass influence on social media and use it for their political goals whilst also considering what and why platforms allow (and disallow) certain behaviours. This process led to one of the strongest contributions of the monograph: how influence on social media is equivalent to digital capital. However, capital is only one element of Bourdieu's ontological oeuvre as he proposed a triple of concepts that coalesce to create a coherent social world, and I have not engaged in his two other crucial concepts: fields and habitus. A field is a cultural setting, such as the art world, scientific community, sporting arena or religious institution, that imposes certain behaviours, or habitus, on individuals who are made to reproduce the habitus in order to successfully navigate the field dynamics and be rewarded with field-related capital. Or, in other words, capital is acquired and exchanged through habitus, behaviour of which is contingent on the conditions of the field.

Today, Bourdieu may well be pleased that his ideas are being rewired for the digital milieu, but he may have something to say about the intrinsic interplay between the three components of his social world and how they should not be evaluated as discreet entities, per se. Throughout the monograph, I have provided in depth accounts about how digital capital has been accumulated and exchanged, but I have not considered this in

relation to the notion of a digital habitus or digital fields. In the *Introduction*, I briefly discussed the excellent works of Massimo Airolo and this concept of 'machine habitus', plus Zizi Papachararissi's 'habitus of the new' to illustrate how one of the key components of Bourdieu's work, habitus, is being purposefully rewired digitally. As far as my research can tell the concept of 'digital fields' has received much less scholarly attention. In their writing on digital habitus, Romele and Rodighiero point out that 'today there is a digital field, with its own specific capital that exercises a particularly strong pressure on all other fields — not only the cultural ones' (Romele & Rodighiero, 2020, 108), but they do not go any further.

In *Chapter 2* I provided a broad overview of Bourdieu's fields and his discussion on television's negative impact on the field of journalism. I suggested that social media can be situated as a significant new field of cultural production, because, like television, social media has massive global reach and take up, and it is ostensibly democratic, but it is financially and politically compromised by an obsession with data. Given the dearth of scholarship on digital fields, I would like to speculate for a short moment on how Bourdieu's concept of fields may intersect with my reconceptualisation of digital capital.

Bourdieu long-term collaborator Wacquant theorised fields as operating under three rubrics that interplay with capital and habitus. First, a field is a 'structured space of positions, a force field that imposes its specific determinations upon all those who enter it' (Wacquant, 2007, 268). In other words, fields demand certain qualities and attributes be acquired and exhibited through habitus for the agent to successfully navigate the space and be rewarded with capital. Thus, if social media is reconceptualised as a digital field, what are the specific determinations imposed upon social media users? As I discussed in *Chapter 5* and my assemblage of affordance folklore, platforms *allow* certain behaviours, actively

encourage others and often subtly or explicitly *discourage* others. For example, when users are told by Facebook that they must use their real name when they open their account, the Facebook field imposes a strict determination *on all those who enter*. However, many information influencers appear to not reproduce the expected digital habitus, instead operating accounts under aliases and pseudonyms, and by acquiring an impressive stockpile portion of digital capital at the same time, these users transgress the rules of the game.

The second rubric of Wacquant's field theorisation is as an 'arena of struggle through which agents and institutions seek to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital.' (Wacquant, 2007, 268) Unlike the first rubric which situates fields as imposing rules and restrictions on agents, the second rubric emphasises how agents within the field also contest power and put each other under duress in the name of capital accumulation. Thus, the ethnographic description of Bosco's live hacking on Instagram and Facebook Messenger in *Chapter 4* demonstrates how nefarious agents (who may be operating for institutions or independently, we will never know) seek to overturn the existing distribution of capital by attacking the users who are successfully navigating the digital field and acquiring large quantities digital capital. As I have described throughout the study, social media performance is a perpetual exchange of digital capital in the form of material titbits (likes, emojis and comments) that contribute to the overall stockpile of a user's digital capital. Given how most of the participants of my study had in some form been the victim of trolling or hacking, it is not difficult to reimagine social media as 'a battlefield wherein the bases of identity and hierarchy are endlessly disputed' (ibid. 268).

The third rubric put forward by Wacquant is interesting because it attests to how power is exchanged and contested between fields who are in opposition to one another. A field has a 'degree of autonomy, that is, the

capacity it has gained, in the course of its development, to insulate itself from external influences and to uphold its own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighbouring or intruding fields' (Wacquant, 2007, 269). Thus, we can envisage that Elon Musk's determination to integrate various new features into Twitter/X, such as longer-form video content, is an attempt to broaden the appeal of the platform to agents inside and outside the field. By replicating the field dynamics of TikTok, arguably the most popular digital field currently, Musk is *upholding its own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighbouring or intruding fields*. Via the notion digital fields, the homogenisation of social media's design features can be seen to be a mechanism to defend a social media platform's autonomy in a highly competitive marketplace where platforms that do not innovate, risk losing user interest and becoming overtaken by rival fields with more enticing affordances.

More than 40 years later, I believe there is a strong rationale to research social media, or other spaces of the internet, through the prism of digital fields that impose behaviours on users, play out as 'battlefields' for the maintenance and disruption of digital capital between users, and try to uphold their own standing against rival fields. Because my research focus did not allow for this broader Bourdieuan view, I have only touched upon the potential value of interrogating social media as digital fields, but I suspect that by fully transposing Bourdieu's three interrelated elements into the world of social world may be productive for Bourdieuan studies and the contemporary study of global digital cultures.

Moving away from Bourdieu, an additional potential limitation of my study is the language I chose to engage my research participants and the wider Sri Lanka media sphere. One virtue of traditional social anthropology is learning the local language of the people being studied and engaging them in their local vernacular. Sri Lanka is a tri-lingual state, with English acting as the lingua franca between Sinhala and Tamil communities. A board

advantage of selecting English as the language I would communicate with research participants with was that all people of the island nation (as well as commentators from abroad) were potentially included in the study. From my work as a journalist in Sri Lanka, I understood that English was widely spoken, especially in the capital, Colombo, and on social media, almost exclusively on Twitter. I can communicate in basic Sinhala, or ‘*Singlish*’, as locals and visitors like to say, and language was never an obvious barrier to my research objectives. Moreover, for most of my research participants, English was often their first, or preferred, language. Nevertheless, engaging participants in Sinhala or Tamil would have made for a very different research project.

Given my interest in activism and resistance, one may suspect that Tamil communities may have formed the most potent resistance movements in Sri Lanka, but this was something I did not find and the data visualisations in *Chapter 4* support this. Perhaps this is an accurate reflection of the digital divide and resource imbalance of internet connectivity and smart phone technology to impoverished Tamil communities in the north of the island. Most of the information influencers I engaged with were ethnically Sinhalese (15 out of the 20 influencers), but it is difficult to judge whether this signals better access to the resources, or if this is relational to population demographics. 72% of the Sri Lankan population identify as Sinhalese, approximately the exact spread of my participant sample. Still, the fact remains; by opting to study English language activists and influencers I delimited some potential cohorts from my research.

My decision to not engage in full language training in Sinhala or Tamil was predominately motivated by the restriction of COVID-19 in place at the beginning of my research in October 2020. At that time, it was highly uncertain whether I would be able to travel to Sri Lanka for ethnographic fieldwork at all, and my primary concern in the first year of my study was innovating plans to *do* anthropology from afar. A combination of the

restriction of the pandemic and the latent opportunities it afforded took me to the University of Helsinki to learn computational methods and Python coding language to configure a datafied approach to ethnography that has become central to my augmented ethnographic process. It is interesting to reflect on the limitations and affordances of myself as an instrument of research in concert with the socio-cultural setting of my study and technological accessibility. In the first instance, the unprecedented restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic motivated my decision to develop datafied approaches, but it was Edward Snowden's revelations years before that had provoked Meta to close API access to its platforms, therefore making Twitter/X the obvious research field site because API access was accessible. Coincidentally, Twitter/X is the platform used most predominately in Sri Lanka for English-language protest because, I suspect, of its affordances of allowing international followers, rather than local friendship networks in the model of Facebook. It is something of a chicken-and-egg syndrome, but if COVID-19 had never happened, I would have produced a very different study. I can clearly see that if I had learnt to read Sinhala from the beginning then my study would have been textually very different, and most likely pertaining to political participation on Facebook. But then I would not have had been able to access and grapple with the materiality and non-neutrality of digital data. Thankfully, I think my decision to focus on Twitter data and therefore English language information influencers is a strength of my study.

9.0 | References

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