Dissidents versus Allegiants on Facebook: An Examination of Facebook Page Networks Related to Channel 4 War Crime Videos on Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study takes a network analysis perspective to understand communities of dissidents and allegiants formed on Facebook in relation to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. Networks representing dissidents and allegiants were formed based on levels of liking and commenting and analyzed across ethnic groups. The results show that the dissident network is more diverse in terms of ethnic composition and has a significantly higher number of commenters than the allegiant network, suggesting greater engagement, and is neither assortative nor disassortative across ethnicity, suggesting the presence of cross-ethnicity interaction. The study suggests that Facebook can help create issue-based communities where people from opposing viewpoints co-exist and perhaps interact, and examines how the nature of engagement in both networks reflects the nature of the related political issue offline.

1. Introduction

There has been a rapid expansion in the body of online politics literature during the past decade. While some early studies ask whether the Internet increases political engagement [e.g. 1; 2; 3; 4] more recent studies explore a variety of topics related to online politics. Social media have the potential to connect citizens of different backgrounds living across national boundaries and to create spaces for discussion and debate. This results in the formation of online political communities that span geographical boundaries. These communities can be diverse and may form based on political figures, parties, events, and issues.

According to Bimber [5], issue-based group politics can be more prominent on the Internet. Engagement in a political issue depends on how relevant the issue is for citizens, how critical it is for them to engage, and how influential their social and political contexts are for engagement. An issue-based study of online political communities should consider offline contexts and interests, as political issues are not limited to online platforms. Scholars such as Wojcieszak [6] and Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero [7] examine how online political behavior affects offline politics.

A different perspective is to understand how offline political issues might affect formation of online issue-based communities. For instance, in the context of a politically divided community, online spaces may be divided too. Political dissidents may form communities where allegiants (those who trust the government and the existing political system) may not play a leading role. Moreover, the dynamics of those communities may depend on the nature and intensity of the political issue. Accordingly, this study examines whether issue-based online communities represented mainly by dissidents tend to differ, in terms of ethnic composition and inter-ethnic interaction, from communities of allegiants. The setting is Facebook networks formed around controversial videos published by the British broadcaster Channel 4 that claimed that the Sri Lankan government armed forces violated human rights during ethnic conflict in that country. The study examines how online communities mainly represented by the Tamil minority (dissidents) differ from the communities represented by the Sinhalese majority (allegiants). In the context of an issue that resulted in traumatizing memories and politically divided groups, communities on social networks may form among members of the same ethnic group, rather than members from different sides of the issue. It is also possible that online social networks allow actors from other backgrounds (e.g. other countries and ethnicities) to get involved with political issues. Therefore, this study also examines the characteristics of main ethnic groups in the online communities related to the human rights violation claim against Sri Lanka. We summarize background literature on political interaction in social media and
describe the Sri Lanka conflict before returning to research questions.

2. Related Literature

2.1. Social Media and Political Activism

Social media allow direct and indirect political communities to emerge. For example, Shklovski and Valtysson [8] discuss how “secretly political” publics were formed in an online discussion forum in Kazakhstan. Highlighting the political role of three communities that represent those publics, they claim that networked publics with different degrees of politics can form online and result in political change, even in authoritarian states.

The rise of social media platforms also resulted in a change in direct political activism. Social media are known to be of particular use for political dissidents. For example, according to Lim [9], social media provided spaces and tools for dissidents to form and expand their networks during the Egypt revolt. She claims that social media helped build and sustain networks of opposition, connect previously disconnected groups, circulate stories about oppression, and globalize the domestic movement. Similarly, Al-ani, Mark, Chung, and Jones [10] discuss how blogs helped create a consistent counter-narrative to the stories published by government media. According to Al-ani, Mark, Chung, and Jones, this counter-narrative was able reach out to a local and international audience, and it shaped the nature of the debate, delegitimizing the authority of the Mubarak Regime. Marzouki, Skandrani-Marzouki, Béjaoui, Hammoudi, and Bellaj [11] claim that Facebook performed political, informational, and media platform functions in the Tunisian revolution.

The Internet has also become an attractive venue for political dissidents to seek support from people overseas. As Warf and Grimes [12] noted, the Internet is a cheap means for activists in the third world to seek support from counterparts aboard without having to obtain a travel visa. Al-ani, Mark, Chung, and Jones [10] also argue that social media help enact counter-power in contexts where counter-narratives are controlled by the government. This is particularly the case in contexts where there is high government control or controversial political issues. For instance, Al-Ani, Mark, and Semaan [13] show that blogs provide the opportunity for Iraqi bloggers and their followers to engage in a dialog that would not have been possible within the physical boundaries, and that intercultural interactions brought in support, knowledge, and advice and helped develop alternative perspectives.

It is important, however, to note that there is a growing body of literature that shows how social media are also used to control or limit political activity, dissidence in particular [e.g. 14, 15]. For example, Pearce and Kendzior [15] discuss the emergence of a networked authoritarianism in Azerbaijan where the government has successfully limited online protest and other political activity.

2.2. Network Perspective and Online Politics

The majority of literature related to online politics and activism is based on the assumption that explanatory power lies in the attributes of individual actors. In contrast, Social Network Analysis (SNA) is based on a relational network perspective that stresses the interdependence among actors and argues that causation is located in the social structure [16]. This relational perspective makes SNA an appropriate method to examine the nature and behavior of actors in online political communities. For example, Himelboim, Hansen, and Bowser [17] use SNA to study the types of information sources sought by Twitter users in the context of gubernatorial elections. Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth, and García-Albacete [18] combine SNA with content analysis to study political mobilization among Twitter users. Himelboim [19] uses SNA to examine cross-ideology exposure among Twitter users. He concludes that Twitter users tend to follow politically-like minded sources. Similarly, from a social network analysis perspective, Himelboim, McCreery, and Smith [20] argue that clusters of Twitter users are politically homogenous, and they are less likely to get exposed to cross-ideological content.

The number of studies that use SNA in the social media and politics literature is limited. Moreover, as exemplified by the above work, many of those studies tend to focus more on Twitter. However, users are politically active on other platforms with different affordances, such as Facebook. Therefore, a study on how Facebook can mediate political activity can provide interesting insight to understand dynamics of online political behavior. Facebook has affordances such as “liking”, commenting, and sharing that arguably help people to engage in political discussions and mobilize. Moreover, people can use the Facebook group feature to form issue or topic-based communities where they might be exposed to different people and content, rather than directly choosing their friends. This may result in interactions different from other social media sites like Twitter, raising the need for examining politics on Facebook from a SNA perspective. Accordingly, this study focuses on two Facebook groups related to
Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. However, this study does not compare differences in political activity between Twitter and Facebook, a topic worth investigating.

3. Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Conflict and Online Activism

The body of social media and political activism literature mainly consists of studies that focus on social media use during the “Arab Spring”. Relatively limited attention has been paid to online activism in the context of South Asia, a region that has its own political issues and tensions that have spurred political activism online. This is particularly the case in Sri Lanka, the South Asian nation that experienced a ravaging ethnic conflict and separatist war for almost three decades. The roots of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict date back at least to the 1950s, the period in which nationalism and patriotism started to grow stronger. According to Uyangoda [21], Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict is centered around the question of state power, and from the perspective of the Tamil minority, this has been expressed in their exclusion from sharing power. Uyangoda also notes that the differences in the way Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms evolved in the post-independence context directly affected the rise of the conflict. He describes how Sinhalese nationalism developed as a hegemonic ethno-nationalist project, while Tamil nationalism evolved envisioning a Tamil “nation” with shared sovereignty.

The deterioration of the relationships between the two main ethnicities (i.e. Sinhala, the majority, and the Tamil minority) evolved to a situation where groups that claimed to represent the Tamil minority sought a more militant approach [22]. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), founded by Velupillai Prabakaran, was the most powerful militant group among them. LTTE fought for self-determination, with the goal to declare a separate country called Tamil Eelam. This group used extremely violent means to fight for its cause, and as La [23] noted, was known for political assassination, suicide bombing, and the recruitment of child soldiers. According to Feith [22] there has been a spiral of attacks and counter-attacks between LTTE and the government forces since 1983, resulting in a loss of an estimated 80000 people. The LTTE collapsed in 2009.

During the end of the war, LTTE strategically retreated with the Tamil population under its control to a small area, with the aim of preventing bombing and shelling by the government forces and creating a humanitarian crisis to build international pressure for a ceasefire [24]. This strategy did not work, as the government forces advanced and the LTTE insurgency was brought to an end. The end of Sri Lanka’s civil war, however, left allegations of war crimes. A group of countries including Britain, France, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland called for a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to discuss these allegations [24]. This caught the attention of the international media, and the British television service Channel 4 broadcast a highly controversial documentary called “Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields” that claimed to expose war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government forces during the end of the war. The documentary was prepared to emphasize the urgency of conducting an international inquiry into this issue, as recommended by the panel of experts appointed by Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary General of the UN.

Social media provided a platform for interested people from different parts of the world to share news about this controversial issue and interact with each other. This is particularly the case among Tamil civilians who sought refuge in other countries. According to Feith [22], the Tamil Diaspora lives in countries such as England, Canada, the United States, Australia, Germany and Switzerland, and they maintain links to Sri Lanka through relatives, friends, and the Internet. A significant number of politically active Sinhalese people also live overseas. These groups may find social media as convenient places to engage in politics related to the ethnic conflict. Feith [22] notes that Sri Lanka was a divided nation by 2010, with the Sinhalese population victorious and the Tamil minority leaderless. It is possible that online communities in social media may be segregated to reflect this divide. However, it is also possible that people from the main two groups as well as other groups find social media more comfortable venues for interaction. Thus, this phenomenon provides an opportunity for a case study on the formation of dissident and/or allegiant communities online.

4. Research Questions

This study examines two Facebook user networks created to support two opposing perspectives related to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. As ethnicity is the main off-line factor related to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict, ethnicity can be related to the activity level in each group. Activity on social network sites depends on the affordances of each platform. Liking and commenting are salient affordances in Facebook. Accordingly, this study asks the following research questions:
RQ1: How do liking and commenting on Facebook indicate activity level in dissident and allegiant networks?

RQ2: What is the nature of the relationship, if there is any, between the ethnic composition of the actors in dissident and allegiant networks and the nature of their activity level (indicated by liking and commenting)?

RQ3: With whom do the ethnic communities in dissident and allegiant networks interact?

To answer the above questions, this study focuses on two Facebook communities that can represent dissidents and allegiants in relation to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. Dissidents used the Channel 4: Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields video to gather international support to urge the United Nations to conduct an international investigation. Among other platforms, Facebook was heavily used by dissidents to share the video, post related content, and promote their agenda. On the other hand, allegiants formed Facebook groups claiming that the documentary was based on fake evidence and the government was fighting against terrorism, not innocent civilians.

5. Method

Data for the study was collected using an API tool available in the NodeXL template for Microsoft Excel. Two Facebook page networks related to the human rights issue were obtained using the template. Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields: A Channel 4 Investigation is a Facebook page created about the Channel 4 documentary Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields. Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 is a response to the Channel 4 video, and this group claims that the Sri Lankan forces did not commit war crimes. This Facebook page includes posts about LTTE attacks and other related posts. These two Facebook groups are appropriate to analyze activism of dissidents and assureds as they represent opposing viewpoints.

Nodes in both networks represented individuals who either liked or made comments on posts, and the edges were created based on co-likes and/or co-comments. Duplicate edges were merged, and edge weights were created to represent the number of posts addressed by both of the linked individuals. Each node was categorized into ethnicity (by a Sri Lankan native) based on clues such as the name, declared ethnicity, and comments. As the dissidents and assureds mainly represented two main ethnicities, their names provided a reliable clue as to their ethnicity. Those actor names that could not be confidently categorized as members of any ethnicity related to the issue were put in a separate category (“other”). Datasets were then exported to graphml files. The network analysis software Gephi was used to visualize the networks, and Gephi along with the R packages igraph and statnet were used to calculate network metrics.

Data analysis focused on identifying properties of the networks in general, visualizing the networks, and identifying differences. Graphs were first partitioned based on modularity, and basic network metrics such as clustering co-efficient and graph density were calculated. The igraph package in R was used to compute network metrics, and statnet to run Exponential Random Graph Models to examine the significance of ethnicity and user type in the network structure. Visualizations were created in Gephi with nodes colored based on ethnicity and user type (i.e. “likers” and “commenters”), and were compared to identify whether there is a pattern of likes and comments that can be identified in relation to a specific ethnicity. For further analysis, attribute data (e.g. ethnicity, user type) were exported to SPSS to examine whether there are significant differences between different ethnic groups in terms of their activity.

6. Results and Discussion

The first section describes the sample obtained by NodeXL. Subsequent sections examine the overall structure of the networks to understand how actors are connected to each other, and the extent of liking and commenting and extent of interaction between ethnicities in both networks.

6.1. Sample

Table 1 provides various metrics on the networks returned by the NodeXL template. The API tool did not return the complete networks. The Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network returned by the API tool included 1032 nodes, and this dataset included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Vertices</th>
<th>Edges</th>
<th>Transitivity</th>
<th>Mean Distance</th>
<th>Modularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields</td>
<td>1032</td>
<td>25627</td>
<td>0.425 (Global)</td>
<td>2.787</td>
<td>0.492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>37567</td>
<td>0.383 (Global)</td>
<td>2.243</td>
<td>0.206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Network Statistics

2249
14.34% of people that were engaged on the Facebook page (the complete network had 7195 “likers”). The Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 returned by the template included 869 nodes representing 30% of the community (the page had 2892 likes). Ethnic composition of the networks (Table 1) returned indicated that they were suitable for the purpose of this study. Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network (the dissident network) included 50.48% Tamils (the minority), only 16.67% of Sinhalese (the majority), and 32.75% of members representing ethnicities other than Sinhalese or Tamil. Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 (the assured network) included 91.83% Sinhalese, 7.13% other, and only 0.92% Tamils.

6.2 Dissident and Allegiant Networks

Table 1 also shows several network metrics. Global transitivity (or clustering coefficient) measures the probability that adjacent vertices of a vertex are connected. This measure indicates the extent to which the connectivity of a network is nonuniformly distributed, perhaps due to social processes such as triadic closure. Clustering in both networks is significantly greater than expected at random, and has values typical of social networks (Newman, 2010, p.402). The mean geodesic distance indicates that the “small world” phenomenon is present in these networks. Each graph has one weakly connected component. Heuristic partitioning to maximize the modularity statistic [25] identifies densely connected clusters in the network that may correspond to communities. The modularity statistic is higher in Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields, indicating that it has more definitive community structure.

As the main goal of the study was to examine how activity levels (indicated by liking and commenting) and ethnicity explain differences in dissident and allegiant networks, an Exponential Random Graph Model (ERGM) was used to measure the significance of those two variables in structuring the networks. According to [26] ERGMs (or p*) models consider an observed network as a realization of a set of possible networks with similar properties, and they help explain what processes generated the observed network. This technique allows testing dependence hypotheses (expressed in ERGM “terms”) that explain the processes that generate network ties. For this study, three ERGM terms were tested for each network (edges, user type, and ethnicity). Table 2 shows the results of the models. Both user type and ethnicity were significant for the Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network. However, for the Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 network, the model did not indicate a reasonable fit. Although the model converged, a warning was given that the statistics are not suitable for interpretation and estimates for user type and ethnicity were infinite. Thus, while activity level and ethnic composition play important roles in the dissident network (Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields), the Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 network data may not be suitable for developing predictive models based on user type and ethnicity.

6.3. Liking and Commenting, Ethnicity, and Engagement

Networked technologies offer new affordances that shape how people interact in networked publics. Boyd [27] stresses that the properties of bits offer new possibilities of interaction. While it is important to understand new possibilities for interaction, researchers should also pay attention to how the design of the platforms constrains behavior. Facebook has the “liking” facility for people to express their interest. However, the absence of a “disliking” facility constrains action, as there can be content that people dislike. Yet Facebook has the facility to make comments that may help opposing viewpoints to emerge. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of liking and commenting could help explain people’s engagement in Facebook groups.

Table 3 shows activity level in each network. Channel 4 Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network has a high level of commenting (31%) compared to the allegiant network (with 8.7% commenters). On the other hand, Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 has a higher level of liking (91.3%) than the dissident network. A chi-square test showed that there are significant differences between dissident and allegiant networks in terms of commenting and liking.

Figure 1 shows the dissident and assured network graphs based on ethnicity and user type. As shown in Figure 1 graphs a and b, commenters (red color nodes) have considerable presence in the Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields Network. This indicates that people are more active in the dissident network, in the sense that one should be more active and engaged to make comments as compared to mere liking of a post. However, the high amount of commenting in Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network can also be the result of the unavailability of disliking facility. Those who have opposing viewpoints might have to express their discontent by making comments.
Table 2: Monte Carlo MLE Estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>ERGM Term</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>MCMC %</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.79362</td>
<td>0.01447</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;1e-04 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>User Type</td>
<td>0.97113</td>
<td>0.01527</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;1e-04 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>0.35672</td>
<td>0.01290</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;1e-04 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Null Deviance</td>
<td>737503 on 531996 degrees of freedom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residual Deviance</td>
<td>731822 on 531993 degrees of freedom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>731828</td>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>731861</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Iterations</td>
<td>6 out of 20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4    |                | -2.201581  | 0.005437   | 0      | <1e-04 *** |
|                               | User Type     | -Inf       | 0.000000   | 0      | <1e-04 *** |
|                               | Ethnicity     | -Inf       | 0.000000   | 0      | <1e-04 *** |
|                               | Null Deviance | 522835 on 377146 degrees of freedom |
|                               | Residual Deviance | 522835 on 377143 degrees of freedom |
|                               | AIC           | 522841     | BIC        | 522874 |
|                               | Iterations    | 6 out of 20 |

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

Table 3: Network and User Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>User Type</th>
<th>Liker</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commenter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel 4: Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Network</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>1506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Network</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson χ²: 141.504, df: 1 Asymp. Sig.: (2-sided).000, Likelihood Ratio: 151.783, df: 1, Asymp. Sig.: .000

Table 4: User Type and Ethnicity (Channel 4: Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields Network)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Type</th>
<th>Page Creator</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commenter</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within User n</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liker</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within User Type</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within User Type</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5: User Type and Ethnicity (Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 Network)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Type</th>
<th>Page Creator</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commenter</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within User Type</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liker</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within User Type</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within User Type</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson χ²: 11.493, df: 4, Asymp. Sig. (2-sided): .022
Likelihood Ratio: 6.600, df: 4, Asymp. Sig. (2-sided): .159

Note: Muslim was included along with the main two ethnic groups as Muslims are considered as a third ethnic category in the Sri Lankan context.
Figure 1. Dissident and Assured Networks (Force Atlas 2 Layout)

(a) Sri Lanka’s Killing fields network: colors of the partitions represent “likers” (red) and “commenters” (blue)

(b) Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 network: colors of the partitions represent “likers” (blue) and “commenters” (red)

(c) Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network: colors of the partitions represent different ethnicities (Green- Tamil, red- Sinhalese, and yellow- other)

(d) Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 network: colors of the partitions represent different ethnicities (Green- Tamil, red- Sinhalese, blue- Muslim, and yellow- other)
As this study focuses on two main ethnicities (the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority), it is also possible that ethnicity is related to the extent of liking and commenting. Therefore, the networks were re-colored based on ethnicity of members.

Figure 1 graphs c and d show ethnic composition of each network. It is noticeable that the dissident network (Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields) has high presence of people from the majority (nodes in red color) and other ethnicities (mainly people from outside Sri Lanka). However, Sri Lankan’s Hate Channel 4 Network appears to be quite homogenous and the Tamil minority has almost no presence in this network. This raises the question whether the presence of members from the opposing camp (the majority in this case) may trigger changes in activity in the Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network. When the graphs a and c, and b and d (Figure 1) are compared, it is noticeable that commenting happens mainly in clusters where people from the opposing viewpoints are present. This shows that the ethnic composition of the network may affect the nature of activity. Accordingly, two chi-square tests were used to further examine the relationship between ethnicity and activity levels in both networks (Tables 4 and 5).

According to Tables 4 and 5, commenting has been almost evenly distributed among different ethnicities (Tamil: 37.2%, Sinhalese: 29.4%, and other ethnicities: 33.1%) in the Killing Fields network. However, the minority dominates liking in this network (Tamil likers: 56.4%), while the members of the majority do not show high levels of liking (Sinhalese likers: 11.1%). The chi-square test was significant (p<0.05, Likelihood Ratio: 61.321), indicating that activity levels are significantly different between ethnicities. On the other hand, Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 network has no commenters from the Tamil minority, and 90.8% of the commenters in this network represent the Sinhalese majority. Similarly, 91.9% of the likers in this network represent the majority. This indicates that the allegiant network is less diverse and is dominated by the majority. However, despite the low likelihood ratio (Likelihood Ratio: 6.600) the chi-square test was significant, indicating that there are significant differences in liking and commenting in this network. This can be the result of the presence of likers and commenters from other ethnicities in the allegiant network.

The results discussed above show that the dissident network is more ethnically diverse and active in terms of commenting. However, the above results do not provide evidence that there is interaction between ethnicities. According to Figure 1 (graph c), there seems to be some inter-ethnic interactions in the Killing Fields network. To further examine inter-ethnic interactions, nominal assortativity was calculated for both networks. Assortativity is a variant of correlation, and it is a measure used to examine selective mixing among vertices [28]. As in correlation, assortativity ranges from +1 to -1: a perfect assortativity (+1) means that vertices of the same category are connected with each other, and a perfect disassortativity is when vertices only connect to those of different categories. Nominal assortativity for Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields was 0.0792 and it was 0.001 for the Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 network. Since these values are close to 0, connectivity in the network is made nearly independent of ethnicity. This means that there is likely to be inter-ethnic (as well as intra-ethnic) interactions as defined by “liking” and commenting, especially in the Killing Fields network as it has a greater diversity of ethnicities present. A sample of comments in the Channel 4 Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields group were examined and found to include sentiments ranging from anger and rejection to support for the claims made in the documentary. However, further analysis is necessary to more systematically examine the nature of comments.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This study suggested that online political engagement and activism should be examined from an issue-based perspective, drawing samples from a population of actors engaged in an issue regardless of geographic boundaries. Accordingly, the study developed two research questions and presented results based on two Facebook group network datasets to examine differences between dissident and allegiant communities formed in relation to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. The results indicated that those two communities differ in terms of their activity level and composition of actors. Liking is an affordance on Facebook that can indicate sympathy towards dissidents, and commenting is an affordance that might indicate a stronger commitment to engage. In the context of activism related to Channel 4 videos about Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict, the dissident network (Channel 4 Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields) showed high levels of commenting engagement in the clusters where actors from opposing viewpoints are represented. However, the presence of people from the opposing camp and high level of commenting by those actors may also indicate that the absence of a disliking affordance may force them to make comments. In contrast, the allegiant network was considerably homogenous and it was dominated by the majority. Moreover, the main activity in the
allegiant network was liking, compared to the dissident network that had a higher level of commenting. The assortativity result suggests that actors from different ethnicities interact with each other in the dissident network.

The above results provide interesting insight to understand online politics, dissidence in particular. In general, the study is consistent with the work of Lim [9] and Al-ani, Mark, Chung, and Jones [10] that showed that social media provide tools for dissidents and help develop counter power. Moreover, the above results are consistent with Al-Ani, Mark, and Semaan's [13] work that show that online platforms help bring out a dialog that may not have been possible within the physical boundaries. LTTE was an extremely violent organization banned in Sri Lanka and several other countries. Given their reluctance to engage in democratic dissidence, pro-LTTE dialog was almost non-existent at least in the “Sinhalese-south.” Moreover, given the popularity of the government after defeating the LTTE, developing a dialog within the country that critiques the behavior of the government was extremely difficult. While the local political atmosphere did not support such a dialog to emerge, Facebook provided a space for pro-Channel 4 groups to promote a documentary that highlighted alleged war crimes. This group was more diverse and indicated more activity in terms of commenting compared to the anti-Channel 4 group. The significant presence of other ethnicities in the dissident network and their activity level (commenting: 33.1% of the commenters, and liking: 32.3% of all the likers) show that the dissident group has been able to garner support from other ethnicities. Although framed within the language of other “ethnicities,” this group mainly represents people from countries other than Sri Lanka, who may or may not belong to specific ethnicities studied.

These results also reflect the offline context related to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. As mentioned before, the Tamil Diaspora is quite active and pro-LTTE politics is stronger outside the geographical boundaries of Sri Lanka. Politics within the country is largely supportive of the military defeat of the LTTE. Therefore, pro-government (and anti-Channel 4) activists mainly represent the Sinhalese majority. The fact that the pro-LTTE camp is more active outside Sri Lanka means that they might be able to gather support from the international community. Arguably, the online spaces (represented by the Channel 4 Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields and Sri Lankans Hate Channel 4 communities) provide a space for Sinhalese, Tamils, as well as people representing other groups to interact with each other. However, this interaction, as mentioned before, includes comments that directly show anger and direct rejection of the documentary, indicating that the interaction may not be meaningful. However, further work can strengthen the findings of this study by examining the nature of the content exchanged through comments.

The study also adds a more nuanced perspective to understand cross-ideology exposure on social media. Himelboim [19] and Himelboim, McCreery, and Smith [20], as discussed before, argue that Twitter users tend to connect with politically like-minded people and are less likely to get exposed to opposing viewpoints. In contrast, the results of this study indicate that people with opposing political viewpoints can co-exist on specific social media platforms (in this case, the Channel 4 Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields network). Arguably, this can result from the differences between Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is a dynamic social media platform that includes a range of facilities including friendship networks, groups, events, issue/topic pages, and pages of organizations. Facebook provides the option of joining or liking issue groups or pages, allowing the users to join a community based on an issue rather than people. This can open the opportunity for people from opposing viewpoints to be part of one network. Therefore, political engagement on Facebook should be understood as a mediated phenomenon. Being members of an issue-based community does not guarantee interaction among politically divided groups, but this appears to be happening in this case.

Despite the significance of the above findings to understand online engagement related to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict and political dissidence, the study has several limitations. The sample of the study was not random as data collection was done through the NodeXL plug-in. However, the data obtained are useful as the researcher had no impact on the data collection process and the datasets included a considerable number of people in the communities examined. Although the ERGM terms were significant, the goodness-of-fit plots indicated some deviations. Better fitting models could be found using several other terms. Therefore, the models developed should not be considered as the best models.

This study shows that the SNA perspective can help reveal nuances in online political engagement. While SNA provides an understanding of the structure of communities, it also provides clues to interactions among actors that could be investigated further with content analysis. Future studies can also focus on other issue-based political communities and the interactions between different groups.
8. References


