

# The Information Society

An International Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utis20>

## What lies behind a Facebook page? Insights from an action research project in rural Bangladesh

Manuela Farinosi, Larry Stillman, Mauro Sarrica, Anindita Sarker, Monisha Biswas & Fatema Jannat

**To cite this article:** Manuela Farinosi, Larry Stillman, Mauro Sarrica, Anindita Sarker, Monisha Biswas & Fatema Jannat (2023): What lies behind a Facebook page? Insights from an action research project in rural Bangladesh, The Information Society, DOI: [10.1080/01972243.2023.2188334](https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2023.2188334)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2023.2188334>



Published online: 30 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)









View Crossmark data [↗](#)

PERSPECTIVE



## What lies behind a Facebook page? Insights from an action research project in rural Bangladesh

Manuela Farinosi<sup>a</sup> , Larry Stillman<sup>b</sup> , Mauro Sarrica<sup>c</sup> , Anindita Sarker<sup>b</sup> , Monisha Biswas<sup>b</sup>   
and Fatema Jannat<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Department of Human Sciences, University of Udine, Udine, Italy; <sup>b</sup>Department of Human-Centred Computing, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, Clayton, Australia; <sup>c</sup>Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

### ABSTRACT

This investigation explores ambiguities, limitations, constraints, and ethical issues related to the collection and use of online social data for research purposes from a Facebook community fostered by developmental bodies in rural Bangladesh. Even though there have been prior studies of information and communication technology use in vulnerable communities in development contexts, such research has not taken sufficient account of cultural and power dynamics at the coalface of social research. This investigation also examines the positionality of the researchers, including relationships to patriarchal and communal structures in Bangladesh. In this context, it examines the Facebook posts by women of a village. In particular, it finds that the desire to be seen as a “good woman” acts to regulate personal agency and expression of the village women.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 February 2023  
Accepted 3 March 2023

### KEYWORDS

ICT4D; positionality;  
research methods; social media

## Introduction

This paper ostensibly reports on the use of Facebook by women villagers in a developing country. However, actually conducting research in development situations can itself be problematic, and this issue is also explored. While there are hopes in the research literature, government policies internationally, and the media for the liberating and empowering possibilities of social media, the reality of how social media are used in traditional communities may be somewhat different. We show that the use of Facebook in the village we studied reflected traditional hierarchies of power and control over rural women. From the women's perspective, their concern for being perceived as a “good woman”, not breaking any behavioral norms was particularly salient (Sarker 2021; Stillman et al. 2022). As well as this, we show how traditional hierarchies also affect the international and local Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) involved in the project, including their relationship with foreign university researchers.

Revealing such hidden factors of power and control is usually not part of social media research, but as

we undertook the research process, it became increasingly apparent to us that it needed to be explored in order to, first, better understand the reasons for the limited village response to a social media opportunity, second, to better understand the elusive meaning of the data we collected, and, third, to better understand the nature of the positionality of the research actors (the academics and international NGOs themselves), since their interpretation of the data through difference lenses produces a particular research finding. In fact, sometimes, the researcher cannot obtain full knowledge, and even then, what is obtained may be filtered for reasons outside the researcher's control. Furthermore, the last thing that is needed is recolonization by well-meaning outsiders with idealized research goals imposed on others.

## Context

“Digital Bangladesh” features in Bangladesh's national development discourse (Prime Minister's Office and Government of Bangladesh 2019). However, the resulting policies have been criticized for favoring the urban

privileged classes, rather than the majority poorer rural population (Chowdhury 2020).

In Bangladesh, according to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, in December 2019, the total number of mobile phone subscribers was 165 million (of a population of 163 million)<sup>1</sup>. One hundred percent of the country is covered by the cellular network, with a claimed 98% coverage of the total population for both the 3G and 4G network in 2019. 71% in 2019 of the population owned a phone. It is estimated that almost all social media (such as Facebook) access in the country is via mobile devices. Eighty-six percentage of men own a mobile, as compared to 61% of women (GSMA 2020).<sup>2</sup> However, at least 11% of Bangladeshis feel that the family does not approve of women owning a mobile phone (GSMA 2020). Moreover, given the general disparities in access to material and social resources between urban and rural populations in Bangladesh, gender gaps, including lower literacy rates for women, appear to be more substantial in rural areas when it comes to ICT access and use (GSMA 2020). This disparity in access by women to ICTs and informational possibilities was one of the major motivations for interest by Oxfam in a research project with Monash University.

PROTIC (Participatory Research and Ownership with Technology, Information and Change) project, 2015-2019, as a collaboration between Oxfam and Monash University, was funded by a private philanthropy. PROTIC was implemented in three different remote geographical locations, in the southern coast, in the northern sandy island region, and the north-eastern wetland areas, of Bangladesh (Stillman et al. 2020; Stillman et al. 2022).

For PROTIC, 300 women in three geographically and economically diverse villages with different agricultural and fishing practices were provided with smartphones (100 in each community). Smartphones rather than more simple devices were provided because Oxfam was of the view that the project should investigate internet connectivity rather than mobile phone communication. Participants were chosen to represent local social and economic diversity by Oxfam and the locally-contracted NGO. More detailed accounts of PAR (Participatory Action Research), the project timeline, and the outcomes can be found in Begum and Chakraborty (2017) and in Stillman et al. (2022).

In each region, a tailored SMS message campaign on particular crops and animals or fish, and free out-bound dialing for the women to call a rural information call-center was contracted to an experienced

tele-information provider. The content selection was based upon the preferences stated by the village women during the consultations in 2015. A number of Bangla-language apps were also used in the project, with socially-oriented information, e.g., religious songs, beauty and self-care information. Once the villager women showed interest in doing new things with their phones, the project management group started a discussion with them about Facebook, which was chosen because it was a recognized name even among villagers who had not used it before.

Due to resource constraints, the project was unable to field-test a pilot, so the Facebook initiative was run “cold”. Furthermore, we were only able to study activity in one village on the southern coast.

## Literature review

### Online social data

In the last decade social media use has grown the world over, including rural areas in developing countries. Moreover, development bodies have been fostering online communities in the Global South. For these reasons, online social data is becoming part of development projects.

In online sites, engagement is characterized by a wide range of digital media practices, ranging from liking something a friend posts to forwarding weblinks or making posts to friends and family. The data on such digital traces (text, images, video, and meta-data) can be fruitfully used in conjunction with data that has long been used for social research: observational and interpretive data. However, the analysis of individualized data needs to be tempered with a sensitivity to the patriarchal, and communal environment such as that found in Bangladesh.

It is imperative that researchers bear in mind the limitations of this type of data and address consciously how they can be used in the context of their study (boyd and Crawford 2012). For example, according to Manovich (2011), we need to be wary of taking digital content as intrinsically “authentic”. Posts, comments and photographs may not transparently reflect what people think and do and are always already prefigured through a platform’s tools (Gitelman 2013). More broadly, social media platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs, but come with values and norms embedded in their algorithmic architectures (Couldry 2012; Noble 2018).

There are two other factors which we also consider particularly significant in ICT4D (ICT for Development) research concerning online social data: the first being

the environment of postcolonial and decolonial computing, and the second, the mix of power relations and behaviors constituted by patriarchy and collectivism.

### ***Postcolonial and decolonial computing***

The formal era of colonialism may be over, but the post-colonial relations continue. In the case of computing research, as Ali (2016, 20) notes, “the abstract or universal body of ubicomp (and related disciplines) is arguably Eurocentric/Western centric.” Even though there have been prior studies of ICT use in vulnerable communities in Brazil, India, Kenya, and Bangladesh, among others, such research has not taken sufficient account of cultural and power dynamics at the coalface of social research (e.g., Ashraf et al. 2017; Nemer 2016; Wyche 2015; Wyche, Schoenebeck, and Forte 2013).

Facebook’s digital environment, modeled on the individualism, norms, and physical infrastructure of developed countries, should not be assumed to operate in the same way in the Global South. To contextualize Western ICT in a developing country, one needs to investigate how the forms of social relationships and forms of literacy differ as well as take into consideration the use of non-digital communications technologies (Frings-Hessami et al. 2019; Stillman et al. 2022).

Furthermore, beyond global level power asymmetries, which have long preoccupied development researchers, unequal relations of power between the parties to any development project, including field researchers, need to be recognized as real and present in the micro or coalface context. Societal structures and normative expectations may put constraints on the capacity of people to undertake social change beyond limits that are acceptable to parties that are beholden to particular hierarchies and social structures, e.g., researchers bounded by university cultures (adherence to data collection protocols approved university ethics committee, and the pressure to publish), or local patriarchy.

### ***Non-government organizations***

International and local NGOs in Bangladesh operate in an environment characterized by a culture of accountability, deference, and compliance to keep in favor with government authorities and gain permission to work (Lewis 2016).

The downward influence and power of NGOs on villagers in a traditional and patriarchal society should also not be ignored. In the early 2000s, at least 20-35% of the Bangladeshi population received some form of

service (e.g., education, credit, health) from an NGO (Lewis 2016), and the number is probably much higher today. As a useful comparison, in India there is said to be one NGO for every 400 people. Many villages are associated with several projects and the word “beneficiary” is often used, reflecting a dependency relationship – NGOs provide many forms of assistance.

### ***Patriarchy and collectivism***

Village women have to work within the constraints of the patriarchal bargain<sup>3</sup> in a collective environment (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar 1979; Kabeer 1997; Thapa, Sein, and Sæbø 2012). Patriarchy is also certainly a constraining factor for women’s use of mobiles in Bangladesh (Malhotra and Ling 2020; Minar and Naher 2018; Sadaf and Siitonen 2022). In such a context, it can be difficult for the researcher to know what is really going on, because women may not want to reveal anything that affects their image as a “good woman” (Sarker 2021; Stillman et al. 2022). Women’s capacity to express hedonistic wants, excitement, novelty, and desire to challenge the powers that be is low (Shams et al. 2021). Further, in a collectivist culture, the individual is subsumed to the interests of the collective.

To understand this context, publications dealing with mobile phones and gendered social media in Bangladesh and India were reviewed. Ashraf et al. (2017) recognized the lack of large-scale longitudinal and theoretically informed studies, as well as noted the continuing presence of social constraints. Taking up Sen’s (2001) idea of the enhancement of the personal dimensions of freedom as central to development beyond crude economic measures, they argued that socio-economic freedom is dependent upon reducing the negative social constraints upon women’s use of ICT including cultural and religious constraints upon mobility, and other factors such as literacy and the capacity to work.

Despite these difficulties, Bangladesh-focused ICT4D research studies suggest that access to mobiles can have positive outcomes in several areas of rural women lives including health and wellbeing, education, livelihood and social security, social status, and emergency response (Alam, Yusuf, and Coghill 2010; Elder et al. 2013; Rahman et al. 2013).

## ***Methodology***

### ***Ethical considerations***

While the project had received a formal university ethics approval<sup>4</sup>, the researchers were very aware of

the additional ethical responsibilities of working in a very different culture. Therefore, they also adhered to Oxfam's Code of Conduct which is attuned to the sensitivities of working with vulnerable populations, including women and children.

Given the potential for the exploitation of people online (including their images), Holm (2020, 581), writing about photography as a research method, noted: "it is difficult to know if participants fully understand how their own photographs or the photographs of others might be used later". For this reason, within the PROTIC project there was concern for the dangers of abuse, and workshops were organized for some of the leading village women. Furthermore, field research cannot be conducted in Bangladesh without permission of the government and the hosting development agency. Consequently, obtaining "free and informed consent" in such an environment is inevitably bound up with power and dependency relationships. Care was taken, as far as possible, to obtain free and informed consent.

### **Data collection and interpretation**

The interpretive approach for the photograph/text and other data studied here from Facebook is informed by the literature on ethnographic approaches to photograph and text. As we know from this literature, the ethnographic approach is also dependent on the researchers' and participants' own positionality or habitus, and their accompanying reflexivity. Interpretation of visual materials in a cross-cultural context, as in our project, calls for "a reflexive approach to classifying, analyzing and interpreting visual research materials recognizes both the constructedness (sic) of social science categories and the politics of researchers' personal and academic agendas" (Pink 2007, 117).

Much like a text, a picture is a "self-referential system" (Bohnsack 2008) encoding a set of assumptions by the producer of the photograph (such as a villager) which can then be decoded. That again, then provides a "deeper semantic structure," what Barthes calls the "obtuse meaning" (quoted in Bohnsack 2008). Umberto Eco regards this obtuseness as providing "productive ambiguity" for interpretation (quoted in Bohnsack 2008).

As with any form of qualitative data, there is no one correct or perfect way to manage and analyze textual, photographic, and video data. However, there should be consistent categorization and processes for sorting and analysis. This organizing process is only

the start: analyzing the photograph and text helps to form the theory, based on our understanding of the lives and activities reflected in the posts. As Holm (2020, 22) also suggests, "the power of the photo lies in its ability to unlock the subjectivity of those who see the image differently from the researcher."

### **Data management**

The women were called "animators" by Oxfam and the NGO and the PAR training agency, on the assumption that they had the capacity to motivate others in the community to use the Facebook page for posts. The village community worker also chose to set up a personal public profile for herself, rather than a group site or page. Why this choice was made is unclear and it could have reflected a lack of skill and understanding of Facebook by the community worker.

We manually extracted all posts ( $N=141$ ) shared on the wall of the PROTIC village Facebook profile from January 2017 to March 2018, when this phase of the project wound down. We monitored the online practices and social interactions (i.e., posting, captioning, commenting, and replying) using an ethnographic approach (Hine 2015), with the aim of exploring communication, culture, and power relationships. All the posts came from the women who received trained, or project-related staff. None were made by other villagers, though there were "likes" for their animator posts from other people, including project staff. We also do not know how many women were passive observers who went on Facebook but did nothing to indicate their presence.

The relevant categories that were used to code posts were as shown in Table 1.

The postings by month are presented as a consolidated number as shown in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Coding categories.

1. Date of post on Facebook
2. Author name (anonymized)
3. Role of the author within the village (animator, local community worker, NGO worker)
4. Type of content (text, photo, video, audio, link)
5. Textual content in Bangla (and/or a description of the content of photo(s)/video(s) in the post)
6. Textual content translated in English
7. Thematic category (1) Agricultural matters and animals; 2) NGO and CBO work; 3) Social life, communication, and networking; 4) Personal and family traditions; 5) Religion; and 6) Missing content, duplicates, and errors.



**Table 2.** Monthly distribution of the posts within the PROTIC Facebook profile.

Jan 2018	Feb 2018	Mar 2018	Apr 2018	May 2018	Jun 2018	July 2018	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019	Total
19	48	21	9	1	1	3	3	0	6	7	9	3	3	10	141

## Results

There were more visual or text and image posts than purely textual ones. This is probably related to the fact that many women in the village are unable to use a keyboard in either the Latin alphabet or Bangla, and therefore prefer to use visual content or rely on the help of other family members. In fact, it appears that many of the visual posts are identical, made at roughly the same time, during a training session when other family members, particularly children, who are more literate, were present. Thus, they are largely not individually created posts, but rather, products of “classroom activity”.

Some posts also contained videos. In February 2018 during the main training period, one clip was of a religious ceremony, another from a training session showing one of the women speaking. Each was posted by a different villager. In March, 2018, the community worker posted a link to an online TV news report about the project, but posted this at least 8 times! A video about the project used by Monash University was also posted by the community worker. Several posts concern local religious ceremonies (posted by a villager). Another post in February 2019 has a video of a religious pilgrimage to a site in India as well as photographs. The villager is featured in the videos. The majority of posts occurred in the first three months, and especially during the February period, when training was provided.

The average number of posts was just over five. Oxfam itself and the local community worker who established the Facebook presence posted 15 times (3 and 12 times, respectively). Twenty-eight women made at least one post. However, one individual posted 33 times, another 19, one 12, and two others 10 times. Thus posting dominance was established by a few individuals and Oxfam.

The categories for coding the content of the posts published within the PROTIC Facebook profile ( $N=141$ ) were identified during an initial reading of the posts, and were as follows: (1) Agricultural matters and animals ( $N=48$ ); (2) NGO and CBO work (training, meeting, publicity) ( $N=32$ ); (3) Social life, communication, networking ( $N=29$ ); (4) Personal and family traditions ( $N=18$ ); (5) Religion ( $N=3$ ); and (6) Missing content, duplicates, and errors ( $N=11$ ).

**Figure 1.** A post showing home vegetable garden.

## Agricultural matters and animals

This category had the most posts, with 48 of the 141 posts. Almost all these posts were made by women repeating training materials. Thirty posts concerned different sorts of vegetables, six about fruits, two about shrimp, two about chickens, two about cattle and goats, one about ducks, and five about other matters.

Interestingly, there were no posts or comments about rice, although this is the dominant crop in Bangladesh. This may be because the villages did not ask for assistance with rice production in the formative stages of the project, rice work is done in paddies away from the house, and is more of a male responsibility. We also see a distinction between the growing of vegetables for home consumption and rural production for income generation.

Vegetable posts typically concern food intended for home consumption (e.g., [Figure 1](#)). Some of the posts are commercial in nature, reflecting the engagement of women in the broader economy. A number of the women are engaged in small-scale commercial activities such as raising ducks, chickens, and shrimp. In such posts, the photograph of the woman was taken by someone else – almost certainly another village woman or the community worker.

Compared to the more robust local varieties of animals and vegetables, commercial products require extra care and effort because of their fragility. For example, in [Figure 2](#) a woman who had her farming work photographed said in the accompanying Bangla text: “As an animator for PROTIC, I can earn extra income by feeding ducks and chickens from home, cultivating vegetables by the ‘bag method’ and raising pigeons”. Three of the extra photos attached to her post are shown because they provide further detail to her activity (the images are to the right of the main post). The technique of growing plants in bags that have fresh water poured into them was introduced by the project. Riverine water is increasingly saline, so using fresh stored rain water makes for healthier, higher quality vegetables. Duck eggs are particularly prized as a source of income.

The above described activities take place very close to the home and courtyard, reflective of everyday gendered life. A woman cannot stray too far from her home and courtyard, where everyday life takes place (e.g., cooking, child-rearing, caring for others, socializing). Home-based horticulture and animal production (ducks, pigeons) does not break any social conventions concerning the woman being away from the home.

The commercially-oriented image in [Figure 2](#) showcases a “good woman” with a practical goal, to bring in income. The woman was confident enough – or had her husband’s permission, to share a photograph of herself, taken by another woman, child or even the husband himself.

In another post, not reproduced here because of space limitations, the text provides specific details on the treatment of duck plague. Here the woman has copied a text with technical language. Whether or not she copied and pasted or typed this text is unknown. Despite this, from other research we know that there has been individual knowledge transfer and even written documentation produced by some of the women that is collectively shared (Frings-Hessami et al. 2019; Sarrica et al. 2019). Individual knowledge and skills are shared with the community. These posts are probably also linked with offline relationships linked to the other local CBO and NGO offline activity, such as discussing animal growth, problems during monthly meetings, and training by the local government agricultural extension service officers.

### NGO and CBO work

This category was the second most-posted category, with 32 of the 141 posts. Thus, while there were a

total of 20 posts from the project, there were another 12 from the women themselves that directly noted the training or a project event. This is indicative of the dominance of these organizations in the environment of PROTIC overall, and in the subsequent implicit framing of the Facebook experiment.

Looking at the time-distribution, posts were clustered around the same dates. It is clear that there was very little independent posting, as the topics were probably suggested by the NGO’s community worker, with individual capacity and choice mainly being expressed in the way people made posts. Thus, for the women, being taught how to use Facebook had two implications. On the one hand, women acquire new competencies such as making a post or taking many photos for others to see and assumedly admire for what is presented (such as beautiful vegetables representing being a good cultivator). On the other hand, independence is tempered by the communal, constrained setting subject to the NGO’s influence.

Performative institutional activity is also common, reflecting the cultural and political obligations felt by the NGOs. The local NGO has used a mass rally (including manufactured banners sponsored by the project), to create an image to impress the donors and high level government officials. This reflects power dynamics and hierarchical relationships. First, there is the asymmetrical relationship between the local NGO and the villagers who, as beneficiaries of assistance, demonstrate their commitment to the local NGO by taking part in a larger event. Second, the local NGO demonstrates its loyalty to its funders, including the university, with the banner carrying an English-language statement and university logo. More broadly, such banners are very common for institutional activities and meetings in Bangladesh as a performative statement. Third, we can suggest that the villagers themselves are also engaged in performative activity as they are dependent on the NGO as beneficiaries of their care and support.

In [Figure 3](#), we see the presentation of an organized collective activity, via the lens and words of the NGO worker who posted it. This is not spontaneous activity by the community. Such rallies are common. The text in the post says:

Today, March 22, World Water Day 2019, with theme “Leaving no one behind”, the animators of the local NGO PROTIC Project organized a discussion meeting and a rally to mark the day.

In the top image, villagers, as well as people from the NGO, have gathered near a public building, such as a school or a local government office, situated in



**Figure 2.** A post showing commercial agriculture and animals.

a local government location. In the lower two photographs (accidentally repeated, but not removed), there are also other men, perhaps NGO officials, and they were probably in the area before the time of the rally. In the background are other people, wearing hats and scarves that almost certainly have a slogan on them. The rally takes place next to government buildings.

In [Figure 4](#), we see group training at the local NGO headquarters. In the photograph on the lower right, there is a banner announcing the event. As in the rally, there is a line in English with the name of

the project. Once again, this is clearly directed at funders. The text on the banner reads: “Training on use of SMS to access agricultural information service organized by NGO on agriculture-related SMS use”. In the upper right photograph, we also see the women assembled at tables, looking at their phones. In the lower right photograph, one of the women is also standing up and talking with the community women group.

The context of the rally in [Figure 3](#) can be interpreted as follows. The first line of the banner in the





**Figure 3.** A post featuring a collective action.

top image is in English though usually the villagers are unable to read it. Notice the presence of the university, Oxfam, and NGO logos. Women are presented at the head of the procession, though in the

smaller photograph (accidentally posted twice), there are other people, including male community workers. A certain level of authority is conveyed by this presence.



**Figure 4.** A post featuring group training.

In [Figure 4](#), a front-line NGO worker is facilitating the training course. Her outfit is different from the participants indicating that she is Muslim. All the

other women from the community are Hindu and married as they are wearing a red dot (bindi) on their foreheads.

Both photographs reflect a certain level of formality and power relations with a continuing colonial influence. A rally is organized for an official occasion. In the NGO office, tables, chairs, and their placement typically reflect hierarchical spatial arrangements in Bangladesh, inherited from the colonial system of government, and not just traditional hierarchy. The expert sits at the front. Tables and chairs are also used in the NGO building. Traditionally, people sit directly on the ground or on matting. But here, they are in the more formal office setting. Photographs of the banner and people will also be used in NGO publications and photographs put up in the main NGO office and the local branch office. This is the formal way to show training in action beyond text in reports.

Further, offering a chair and place at the table to the village participants is a way of showing respect, and the woman feels honored. In contrast, when training is conducted in the village, they sit on the ground, often in a circle, because it is in the village setting, but the trainer or others will still be the center of attention, sometimes sitting on a chair. This is also especially the case with government officials, westerners such as academics, and NGO representatives. Furthermore, also coming to Dhaka for other meetings and trainings is a kind of reward for being a participant in a project and this offers the women a travel and hotel opportunity that they might otherwise not have.

### ***Social life, communication, and networking***

The third category encompasses a mix of social life, communication, and networking, with 29 of the 141 posts. These posts feature phatic communication, an indication of being connected with others. In other words, they are not intended to communicate a particular message, other than being in touch through a gesture like a wave, or a “hello”.

In Figure 5, phatic communication is at play, highly coded within the cultural context. A good night wish with a random photograph of a child has been copied from another SMS or a website (note the URL under the Bangla words – a site in the Bengali-speaking part of India). We do not know if this image was obtained by the woman or provided to her.

The baby is white, not brown. There is a preference for a light skin in Bangladeshi society, as in many other countries, where white skin is regarded as an indicator of superior beauty. A healthy baby with a fair skin tone is adored by everyone, it does not matter if the child is non-related or unknown to them.

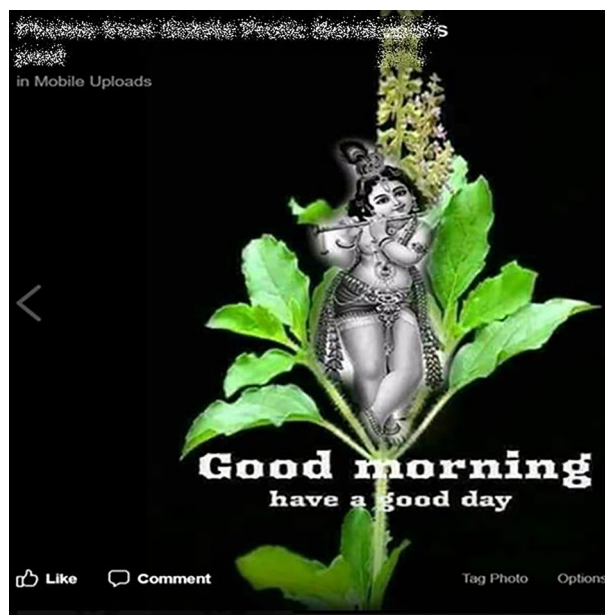
### ***Personal and family traditions***

This category had 18 of the 141 posts. There are some, but not many photographs of the women themselves. They are mainly of children and sometimes spouses and animals. Sometimes the children are with small animals.

Because spouses were not the subject of the ethics protocol approved by Monash University, and children cannot be depicted, we are not reproducing any of these posts. In any case, all the photographs clearly reflect, as in any culture, pride in children and what is



**Figure 5.** A post featuring phatic communication (translation: Good night).



**Figure 6.** A post featuring social communication with an indication of religion.



important in the household, in this case, the possession of healthy animals. The women are comfortable enough to share this material with people they know in the community.

Sometimes the posts had some religious content, but the communication is clearly of social nature. For instance, Figure 6 is one that is part of a group of images uploaded in one post. This is not a religious message, just a social activity with an indication of religion. Note that the text is in English, the language of power and status. The deity is Krishna. Once again, we do not know the source of the image.

### Religion

This category had 3 of the 141 posts. The performative aspects of religion are important in all cultures, and increasingly people go online to participate in collective rituals all around the world. Birth, death, marriages, and religious festivals are major events in a traditional society. Here, in a Hindu-majority village, there were a few distinctly religious posts referring to particular Hindu rituals, though, as discussed above, some posts have been included in the personal and family traditions category because they carry a mix of personal, family, and traditional communication (such as holiday or phatic greeting) rather than conveying an explicitly religious message.



Figure 7. A post featuring religious practice.



In [Figure 7](#), a Hindu villager has posted a video and photographs of a Hindu ritual after the death of her mother. The text reads “My mother’s Ramayana song event”. The context: as death is a major event, we observed that though the post was shared by a villager, it also gathered 18 likes from other community members. The post was also shared (tagged) with other 10 persons, most of them were from her community, but one of them was the NGO frontline worker. We assume the shaven-headed persons in the photographs were the sons of the dead mother. Only men are present at such events. The same women also made other posts of Hindu events where only men were videoed and photographed, but one features photographs of her on the pilgrimage at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, at least a day away across the border in India.

### **Missing content, duplicates, and errors**

This last category had 11 of the 141 posts. As the self-descriptive category name indicates, it included posts that did not fit into the previously expressed categories. These were mostly posts that were published several times, probably in error, or posts with content that was published but later removed.

### **Conclusions**

We drew upon an emic approach to culture (Pike 1954), in which we regarded cultural boundaries as not firm but blurred, emergent, and changing, as people learned about each other and their cultural and academic layers over time through field immersion and the subsequent research process (Stillman et al. 2022). Additionally, this cultural interpretation extended to deconstructing the Facebook posts in terms of their context within a patriarchal social system in which certain behaviors were expected (and internalized) by the study participants. What initially appeared to be a simple task of coding Facebook posts in fact resulted in a complex and time-consuming thematic coding of data in Bangla and English and cultural interpretation and reflection on the part of those engaged in the research. This awareness of researcher positionality (Holmes 2020), became as significant as the cultural interpretation of the posts themselves, and in the context of development research, consciousness and self-interrogation around issues of top-down power, resources, control, culture, race, whiteness (Garner 2007) and gender, whether in institutions (NGOs or universities) or in fieldwork are critical.

The non-Bangladeshi research team was very aware of the interaction between people of very different

backgrounds: Australians (with our own mix of European and British culture), and two Italians, with training in the social and information sciences. Some were very familiar with international development, others less so. The Italians and Australians also came from different intellectual and cultural traditions, not to speak of working in Australian English. The Bangladeshi researchers, all women, came from educated backgrounds with considerable international NGO experience. They were also conscious of their role as cultural and language translators to the non-Bangladeshis, but at the same time, they were also privileged women in a patriarchal culture. The Bangladeshis were also in a transition from their experience in NGO work and training to becoming academic researchers in the Australian academic tradition.

The reflective work of the Bangladeshi researchers and the knowledge they gave to the other researchers was fundamental to gaining a real understanding of what was going on online and in the broader context of a village as the target of development initiatives. These insights and research skills went far beyond the protocols of data management. This point cannot be emphasized more strongly and researchers must be prepared to engage in ongoing self-reflexivity and work with and respect different cultural lenses. Consequent data interpretation provided surprising results, and these are illustrated in the examples discussed earlier.

Through this careful examination of the different manifestations of power, we were able to reveal something of the reality about a fostered Facebook community in a developmental context: manifestation of a culturally-embedded and curated community in which the affordance offered by the technology played a limited role.

An acknowledged limitation of this study is that we were only looking at the activity of the women in a particular village, and we could not follow links to other people who may have posted to follow their reactions. This would have proved too complicated and would have required additional approvals from the university ethics committee. Second, when we went back to check data, a number of people had closed down their profiles, so we could only work with the record of what we had captured in the past.

There was another learning from the project that offers a note of caution for other researchers. Some matters were not openly discussed with the researchers (both foreign and Bangladeshi) during the project. This included the information about the quality of implementation of the project, as well as interpersonal issues including family relationships during the life of the project. There is a constant fear of not being

seen as a “good woman”, and the ongoing fear of retribution for stepping out of line. There were some very sensitive matters over which we could only gain more insight after there was some distance from the project and local project staff were more comfortable in talking about particular problems.

The project could be construed as a failure for not being able to gain full entry into the world of the village and construct a flourishing virtual presence. But this is the wrong perspective, given the complexities of working in such environments. The backstory to working in the traditional village and with an international NGO may not, in fact, be available to outsiders (Sarker 2021). Sometimes, one cannot gain access to all parts of a social system, and even then, what is obtained may be filtered for reasons outside the researcher’s control. Furthermore, the last thing that is needed is recolonization by well-meaning outsiders with idealized research goals to be imposed on others. Decolonized research is difficult (Datta 2017).

Consequently, a researcher can only do what she can to engage in as open a process as possible in obtaining consent from participants and mindfully conducting a project, accepting that she may be only seeing the front and not back elements of social order and that the “native’s point of view” cannot always be obtained (Geertz 1974; Goffman 1971). Interpretation of online social data in such circumstances requires a narrative that has literary and constructed elements to give meaning (Giddens 1984). This form of social research should be considered like an onion. Layers of delicate skin are peeled away, but not everything is easily revealed, if at all. Full knowledge of reality, including online reality can remain elusive.

## Notes

1. [https://old-btrc-gov-bd.translate.googleusercontent.com/content/mobile-phone-e-subscribers-bangladesh-december-2019?\\_x\\_tr\\_sl=b-n&\\_x\\_tr\\_tl=en&\\_x\\_tr\\_hl=en-US&\\_x\\_tr\\_pto=wapp&\\_x\\_tr\\_sch=http](https://old-btrc-gov-bd.translate.googleusercontent.com/content/mobile-phone-e-subscribers-bangladesh-december-2019?_x_tr_sl=b-n&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-US&_x_tr_pto=wapp&_x_tr_sch=http) (Accessed March 1, 2023).
2. In 2019, 54% of the world’s population used the internet, increasing to 63% in 2021. In terms of gender of users in the developing world, in 2020, 62% of internet users were men, compared to 57% of women. Furthermore, while close to 87% of people use the internet in the developed world, this figure drops to 44% in the Global South and only 20% in the developing world. In least developed countries, only 19% of women are internet users, versus 31% of men. The urban rural divide also plays out in developing countries. Seventy-five percentage of people in urban areas have internet access, versus 72% in the developing world and 47% in least developed countries (ITU 2022).
3. The tradeoffs they have to make to obtain resources and security in a patriarchal social system.

4. Monash University Human Ethics Low Risk Review Committee Approval 6640. December 3, 2016. Amendment Approved October 4, 2019.

## ORCID

Manuela Farinosi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8404-3187>  
 Larry Stillman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6886-1593>  
 Mauro Sarrica  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1167-2788>  
 Anindita Sarker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7614-3417>  
 Monisha Biswas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5719-5000>  
 Fatema Jannat  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2622-0584>

## References

- Alam, Q., M. Yusuf, and K. Coghill. 2010. Village phone program, commodification of mobile phone set and empowerment of women. *Journal of Community Informatics* 5 (3):n.p. Accessed February 12, 2023. doi: [10.15353/joci.vi.2445](https://doi.org/10.15353/joci.vi.2445).
- Ali, S. M. 2016. A brief introduction to decolonial computing. *XRDS: Crossroads, the ACM Magazine for Students* 22 (4):16–21. doi: [10.1145/2930886](https://doi.org/10.1145/2930886).
- Ashraf, M., H. Grunfeld, M. R. Hoque, and K. Alam. 2017. An extended conceptual framework to understand information and communication technology-enabled socio-economic development at community level in Bangladesh. *Information Technology & People* 30 (4):736–52. doi: [10.1108/ITP-03-2016-0067](https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-03-2016-0067).
- Begum, S., and T. Chakraborty. 2017. Participatory research and ownership with technology, information and change (PROTIC): The role of PAR. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Research Initiatives, Bangladesh.
- Bohnsack, R. 2008. The interpretation of pictures and the documentary method. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 9 (3):n.p. Accessed February 12, 2023. <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1171/2592>.
- boyd, d., and K. Crawford. 2012. Critical questions for big data. *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5):662–79. doi: [10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878).
- Cain, M., S. R. Khanam, and S. Nahar. 1979. Class, patriarchy, and women’s work in Bangladesh. *Population and Development Review* 5 (3):405–38. doi: [10.2307/1972079](https://doi.org/10.2307/1972079).
- Chowdhury, A. 2020. OP-ED: Digital Bangladesh: What it is and what it isn’t. *Dhaka Tribune*, December 11. Accessed February 12, 2023. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2020/12/12/op-ed-digital-bangladesh-what-it-is-and-what-it-isn-t>.
- Couldry, N. 2012. *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Datta, R. 2017. Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in Indigenous research. *Research Ethics* 14 (2):1–24. doi: [10.1177/1747016117733296](https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117733296).
- Elder, L., R. Samarajiva, A. Gillwald, and H. Galperin. 2013. *Information lives of the poor: Fighting poverty with technology*. Ottawa, CA: IDRC.
- Frings-Hessami, V., G. Oliver, A. Sarker, and M. Anwar. 2019. Documentation in a community informatics project: The creation and sharing of information by women in Bangladesh. *Journal of Documentation* 76 (2):552–70. doi: [10.1108/JD-08-2019-0167](https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-08-2019-0167).

- Garner, S. 2007. *Whiteness: an introduction* (1st ed.). London: Routledge.
- Geertz, C. 1974. "From the native's point of view": On the nature of anthropological understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28 (1):26–45. doi: 10.2307/3822971.
- Gitelman, L. 2013. ed. "Raw data" Is an oxymoron. Cambridge, UK: MIT Press.
- Goffman, E. 1971. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.
- GSMA. 2020. Connected women: The mobile gender gap report 2020. London: GSMA. Accessed February 12, 2023. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>.
- Hine, C. 2015. *Ethnography for the internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Holm, G. 2020. Photography as a research method. In *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*, ed. P. Leavy, 569–600. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, A. 2020. Researcher positionality – a consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research – a new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 8 (2):1–9. doi: 10.34293/education.v8i2.1477.
- ITU (International Telecommunication Union). 2022. The global connectivity report 2022. Geneva: ITU. Accessed February 12, 2023. <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/global-connectivity-report-2022/>.
- Kabeer, N. 1997. Women, wages and intra-household power relations in urban Bangladesh. *Development and Change* 28 (2):261–302. doi: 10.1111/1467-7660.00043.
- Lewis, D. 2016. Non-governmental organizations and civil society. In *Routledge handbook of contemporary Bangladesh*, eds. A. Riaz and M. Rahman, 219–35. London: Routledge.
- Malhotra, P., and R. Ling. 2020. Agency within contextual constraints: Mobile phone use among female live-out domestic workers in Delhi. *Information Technologies & International Development* 16:32–46.
- Manovich, L. 2011. What is visualisation? *Visual Studies* 26 (1):36–49. doi: 10.1080/1472586X.2011.548488.
- Minar, M. R., and J. Naher. 2018. Violence originated from Facebook: A case study in Bangladesh. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1804.11241*. doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.13087.05282.
- Nemer, D. 2016. Online Favela: The use of social media by the marginalized in Brazil. *Information Technology for Development* 22 (3):364–79. doi: 10.1080/02681102.2015.1011598.
- Noble, S. U. 2018. *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Pike, K. L. 1954. *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure in human behavior*. Glendale, CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Pink, S. 2007. *Doing visual ethnography*. London: SAGE.
- Prime Minister's Office, Government of Bangladesh. 2019. Digital Bangladesh: Concept note. Dhaka. Accessed February 12, 2023. [http://btri.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/btri.portal.gov.bd/page/a556434c\\_e9c9\\_4269\\_9f4e\\_df75d712604d/Digital%20Bangladesh%20Concept%20Note\\_Final.pdf](http://btri.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/btri.portal.gov.bd/page/a556434c_e9c9_4269_9f4e_df75d712604d/Digital%20Bangladesh%20Concept%20Note_Final.pdf)
- Rahman, A., M. N. Abdullah, A. Haroon, and R. B. Tooheen. 2013. ICT impact on socio-economic conditions of rural Bangladesh. *Journal of World Economic Research* 2 (1):1–8. doi: 10.11648/j.jwer.20130201.11.
- Sadaf, S., and M. Siitonen. 2022. "A shameless ideology of shameless women": Positioning the other in social media discourse surrounding a women's rights movement in Pakistan. *Social Media + Society* 8 (1):1–11.
- Sarker, A. 2021. ICT for women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Doctoral dissertation, Monash University.
- Sarrica, M., L. Stillman, T. Denison, T. Chakraborty, and P. Auvi. 2019. "What do others think?" An emic approach to participatory action research in Bangladesh. *AI & Society* 34 (3):495–508. doi: 10.1007/s00146-017-0765-9.
- Sen, A. K. 2001. *Development as freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Shams, R. A., M. Shahin, G. Oliver, W. Hussain, H. Perera, A. Nurwidyantoro, and J. Whittle. 2021. Measuring Bangladeshi female farmers' values for agriculture mobile applications development. In *Proceedings of The Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 1530–1605. New York: IEEE.
- Stillman, L., M. Sarrica, T. Denison, and A. Sarker. 2020. After the smartphone has arrived in the village. How practices and proto-practices emerged in an ICT4D project. In *Evolving perspectives on ICTs in Global Souths*, eds. D. R. Junio and C. Koopman, 81–94. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Stillman, L., M. Anwar, G. Oliver, V. Fring-Hessami, A. Sarker, and N. Ahmed. 2022. The complexities of PAR: A community development project in Bangladesh. In *Handbook on participatory action research and community development*, eds. R. Stoecker and A. Falcon, 218–37. London: Edward Elgar.
- Thapa, D., M. K. Sein, and Ø. Sæbø. 2012. Building collective capabilities through ICT in a mountain region of Nepal: Where social capital leads to collective action. *Information Technology for Development* 18 (1):5–22. doi: 10.1080/02681102.2011.643205.
- Wyche, S. 2015. Exploring mobile phone and social media use in a Nairobi slum: A case for alternative approaches to design in ICTD. In *ICTD '15: Proceedings of The Seventh International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development*, 1–8. New York: ACM.
- Wyche, S. P., S. Y. Schoenebeck, and A. Forte. 2013. Facebook is a luxury: An exploratory study of social media use in rural Kenya. In *CSCW '13: Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work*, 33–44. New York: ACM.