

MODULE 2

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

We humans are highly communicative creatures. We have evolved languages and media as means of communicating with each other.

We not only like to share information and opinions but also weave them into narratives. This makes us story tellers. Story telling is as old as human civilizations.

Today's digital tools and the web provide many opportunities for communicating fast and to a wide audience. Any individual with a basic access device like a smartphone and an internet connection can express herself to the whole world through blogs, social media, podcasts and other means. This has democratized communication. With such great power comes great responsibility.

Communication is not only self-expression. It is also a tool for researching information, organizing and mobilizing people and building communities. Using digital communications, people living in locations far apart or across different time zones can connect, share and collaborate.

Communicating is ideal when it is a two-way process. Mass media (mostly) involves one-way communication from content producers to their audiences. In contrast, communications online can happen in both directions: the web enables easy interaction and participation. It is up to everyone who gets online to use this facility with a sense of purpose, imagination and courtesy.

An important element of communication is the art of listening. Being able to exchange information and opinions in real time is useful, but it sometimes makes us react without enough reflection. We may sometimes regret what was said in the heat of an argument in social media.

In this module, we cover a few basics in communicating effectively and ethically using digital tools. Please consider it as a rough guide to more thoughtful and responsible digital communications at both private and public levels.

KEY TERMS

Digital communication can mean different things to different people.

In a technical sense, it means enabling successful transmissions and reception of signals using digital communication facilities – whether in telecommunications, broadcast or internet.

Digital communication also means individuals and groups communicating their messages using digital technologies and the web. Such communications can be private or public.

Digital storytelling refers to various forms of digital narratives, e.g. web-based stories, interactive stories, narrative computer games, audio and video podcasts, etc. A digital storyteller can be anyone who has a desire to document life experiences, ideas, or feelings through the use of story and digital media.

Strategic communication explores the capacity of all organizations—governments, corporations as well as advocacy and activist groups and for engaging in purposeful communication.



DIFFERENT FORMS OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Digital communication methods, tools and platforms have been expanding over the years. Here are the more commonly used ones:

- **INTERNET** is the world's biggest communication network of computers. It connects millions of smaller domestic, academic, business and government networks, which together carry many different kinds of information. The name is sometimes abbreviated as the net.
- **WORLD WIDE WEB ("WWW" OR "THE WEB")** is the prominent part of the internet that contains websites and webpages. It was invented in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee by creating a new system called HTML. Websites are composed of pages linked by hypertext links. They are written in HTML.
- **ELECTRONIC MAIL (EMAIL)** is an internet service that allows people who have an email address (account) to send and receive electronic messages. Those are much like postal letters but are delivered much faster.
- **VOICE OVER INTERNET PROTOCOL (VOIP)** is a method that allows voice calls over the internet. The best known service is Skype. Using VOIP reduces costs: it does not require a dedicated line as in telephone services. Today many VoIP services allow both voice and video, but the video option consumes more data.
- **MOBILE PHONES** (also known as handphones, cell phones, or cellular telephones) are small portable telephones that allow us to communicate with others anywhere and anytime (provided there is signal coverage). In developing countries in Asia, mobile phone markets are still dominated by basic handsets for voice calls and texting, with no (or very limited) internet access capability. A feature phone, in comparison, has additional capabilities for multimedia (such as photos and music) and internet browsing. To be called a smartphone, however, the instrument must use an operating system such as Android or iOS through which third party 'apps' could be run on it. Smartphones usually come with a touch screen covering at least 75% of its front area. All smartphones can access internet.

- **SOCIAL MEDIA** are a category of websites, web platforms and apps based on user participation and user-generated content. They allow users to interact with each other, as well as to produce, present and promote content. They enable users to engage with audiences that are local, national, regional and global. While social media includes web forums, wikis and blogs, the term is most often used today to describe social networking websites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest and Twitter. In recent years social media have been fueled by the spread of smartphones.
- **INSTANT MESSAGING (IM)** a type of online chat that offers real-time transmissions over the internet. Some IM applications can use push technology to provide real-time text, which transmits messages character by character, as they are composed. More advanced instant messaging can add file transfer, clickable hyperlinks, Voice over IP, or video chat. There are many IM services available today, some of which are attached to social networking sites. However, each IM service offers its own proprietary software client as a separate program or as a browser-based program. Among the popular IM services in Sri Lanka are WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook Messenger.
- **SMS (SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE)** is a text messaging service component of most telephone, internet, and mobile device systems. It uses standardized communication protocols to enable mobile devices to exchange short text messages of a limited number of characters. In recent years SMS use has been declining as the more versatile instant messaging services gain in popularity. But SMS still remains an important technology, for example, in location-based alerting for delivering disaster early warnings.
- **BLOG** is a website that contains information and opinions, usually by a single author, known as a blogger. Prior to blogs, users needed to know coding like HTML to produce a website or they had to get help from someone who did. But blogs opened up online publishing to anyone with internet access by offering content management systems that are easy to use. While personalized blogs dominate the blogosphere (that is, the entire space of blogs), there are also group blogs involving multiple contributors. Some institutions maintain a blog for free discussion of ideas in addition to their own website.



INTERNET AND WEB ARE NOT THE SAME

The terms internet and web (short for world wide web or www) are used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. They are linked but separate phenomena. This is how American computer scientist Vint Cerf, one of the 'fathers of the internet', explains the difference: "The internet is the underlying networking infrastructure that links billions of computers all around the world. The world wide web is an application that sits on top of the basic internet infrastructure. The two are simply layered on top of each other. What you'll experience of the internet, for the most part, is through the world wide web." The internet was developed from the 1960s to allow multiple computers to communicate on a single network. It started in the US and later involved European institutions as well. But the internet remained confined to 'techies' who knew computer programming (or coding) until the easier to use web emerged in the early 1990s largely thanks to the work of British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee.

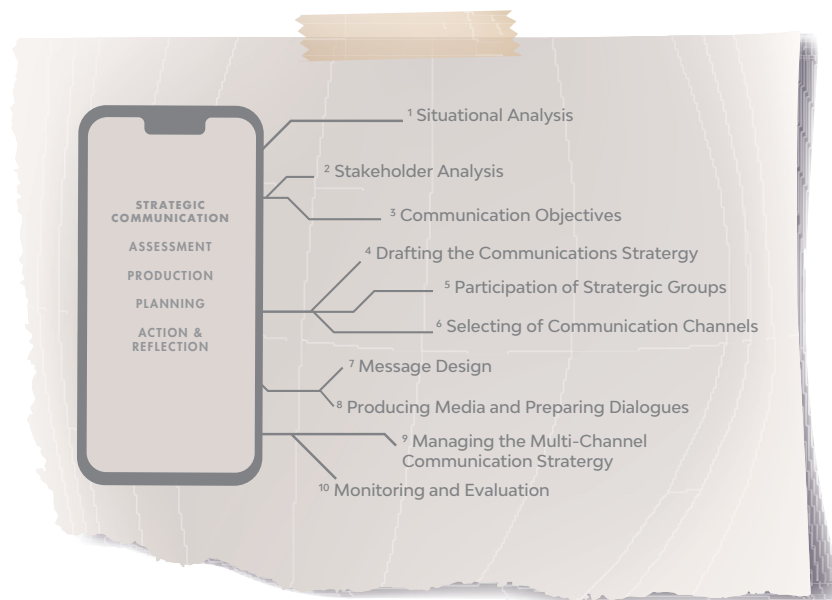
BASICS IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

There are many digital and web-based tools to choose from, including what we have listed above. Most of them are available free of cost for those who sign up or open a user account with the various services.

However, this increased choice does not mean you have to use all or even most of them. Now, more than ever before, we need to be selective and strategic about how we communicate – or we risk just expressing ourselves without being sure if anybody is listening or engaging us.

This is where strategic communication becomes important – it is described as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”.

In strategic communication, message development, or the process of creating key points or ideas, involves high levels of planning and research. These messages are targeted or created with a specific audience in mind (at least a clearly defined primary audience, while everyone else can be secondary audience).



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As seen in this diagram, strategic communication involves four stages (each of which has several actions):

- ASSESSMENT, i.e. understanding what needs to be communicated to whom
- PLANNING which involves deciding how best to engage the chosen audience/s
- PRODUCTION of messages and materials (which comes only after the above two stages)
- ACTION AND REFLECTION involves disseminating, engaging and evaluating that experience

The principles of strategic communications are relevant for both digital and non-digital communications. Having a clear sense of purpose is essential for any form of public communication whether it is for political campaigning, social activism or product marketing.

The word “communication”, comes from the Latin **communicare** (which means to share or to make common) and **communis** (belonging to all). Both terms are also related to the word “community”.



A helpful and non-technical guide to strategic communications is at: <https://www.jrmyprtr.com/comms-101/>

DIGITAL ETIQUETTE

The idea behind digital etiquette (also called internet etiquette or netiquette) is "treat others how you want to be treated."

It means respecting other users' views and displaying common courtesy when posting your own views online, and when interacting with others.

There are appropriate and inappropriate ways to behave and treat one another online, just as there are proper and improper ways related to treating others offline. Your choices of words and actions in the digital world can have an impact on others. It defines what kind of person others perceive you to be.

Here are three common examples:

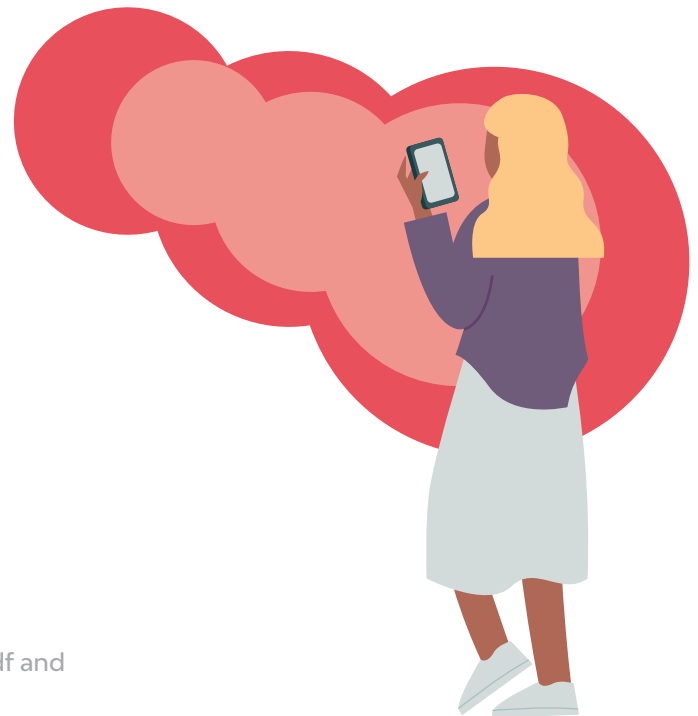
- Imagine you are at a theatre for a movie or play. Somebody's mobile phone rings. Instead of turning the phone off (which should have been done at the beginning of screening or performance), s/he engages in a loud conversation – disturbing everyone around. That certainly should not happen.
- You are having a conversation with a family member, friend or colleague – and also keep checking your mobile phone and responding to incoming texts or instant messaging. Your attention is thus divided between the person in front of you and someone online. This is rude behaviour, and a sign of poor time management too.
- In an email exchange or social media conversation, wishing to emphasize some points you type text entirely in upper case or CAPITAL letters. You mean no harm, but it can be considered "shouting" and therefore rude. Netiquette discourages the use of all capitals when posting messages or in emails. All capitals can be used for a single word or phrase to express emphasis, but NOT for a whole sentence or paragraph (this sentence itself is an example of how to do it right)

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In the above examples, the first one involves behaviour that is not permitted in many theatres and cinemas – the offender could be hushed down by others around, or even be asked to leave by the theatre management. The second and third examples are actions that break social norms rather than any institutional rule.

There are many do's and don'ts that should be practiced when interacting online, and when using digital tools. It is not possible to provide a list here; many online guides and resources are available with such advice.

One thing to remember: adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life. Respectful and ethical behaviour matters both online and offline.




² See, for example, <https://uncw.edu/oel/documents/pdfs/netiquette.pdf> and <https://www.verywellmind.com/ten-rules-of-netiquette-22285>

DON'T FEED THE TROLLS!

In internet slang, a troll is someone who tries to cause discomfort or distress in others. Trolls sow discord and create 'drama' needlessly to gain attention for their own amusement by posting inflammatory, extraneous, off-topic messages with the deliberate intention of provoking readers into an emotional response. There are various types of trolls – those who simply poison public discourse, as well as those who freely express derogatory or discriminatory views under the name of "free speech" (which has certain limits). Not all controversial or unpopular comments are the work of trolls, as radically disagreeing opinions can sometimes stimulate useful discussion. For this reason, it is not always easy to tell whether someone is trolling or being simply very opinionated. How to deal with trolls? The best advice: ignore them, rather than giving them the satisfaction of any attention or reaction. If you don't feed the trolls, they'll probably leave you alone.





WITH ALL DIGITAL MEDIA, BE RESPECTFUL, AVOID ANGRY OUTBURSTS AND BE CAREFUL HOW YOU USE SATIRE OR POTENTIALLY INAPPROPRIATE HUMOUR. WHAT WORKS IN PERSON OR EVEN BY PHONE SOMETIMES DOESN'T WORK WELL ONLINE BECAUSE THE HUMAN CONTACT THAT PUTS THINGS INTO CONTEXT IS OFTEN MISSING. AND REMEMBER, ANYTHING YOU POST OR SEND IN AN E-MAIL OR EVEN TEXT MESSAGE CAN FOREVER BE COPIED, STORED OR FORWARDED. SOMETHING YOU POST OR SEND TODAY CAN HAUNT YOU FOR YEARS." -

LARRY MAGID, IN DIGITAL ETIQUETTE FOR THE
21ST CENTURY

UNDERSTANDING MOBILE JOURNALISM

Mobile journalism is a form of digital storytelling where a smartphone is the primary device used for creating and editing images, audio and video. Both professional journalists and citizen journalists can benefit from this practice.

One definition for mobile journalism is this: “a new approach for media storytelling where reporters or activists are equipped for being fully mobile and fully autonomous”.

Smartphones are at the heart of mobile journalism, and are increasingly used by journalists for radio news and podcasts, and video for TV news and documentaries as well as videos for social media platforms.

More than any other device, smartphones encourage cross-platform creativity and digital innovation. Photos, videos, audio and graphics can be created and edited on the phone and uploaded to news media websites and/or social platforms directly. You can also respond to audience queries and contacts via chat apps, social messaging and email.



A smartphone can put a complete production studio for radio, television, text and social content in your pocket. Here are a few reasons to take up mobile journalism.

- **Affordable:** You can achieve TV-quality video by combining a good quality smartphone with an external microphone, a tripod and tripod mount, and by using a professional video recording app. This set-up is significantly cheaper than a traditional broadcast quality video camera.
- **Portable:** Most mobile journalists can fit their equipment in a backpack. The phone plus a lightweight tripod, clip-microphones and an external light can weigh under 3kg, making it easy to produce high quality stories anywhere, anytime.
- **Discreet:** The fact that smartphones are so commonplace makes them a valuable tool for journalists who need to operate discreetly.
- **Approachable:** The small size of smartphones, and the fact that they are so commonplace, means they are less intimidating for interviewees. A study by the Reuters Institute of Journalism found that people are more likely to agree to an interview and to open up in front of a smartphone than in front of a larger TV camera.
- **Apps for beginners to professionals:** There are dozens of storytelling apps for iPhones and Androids. Some are simple and designed for quickly creating social stories with animated titles, fun captions and free music. They are also fast to learn and use, so they're ideal for creating a great-looking story on a deadline.

TIPS FOR USING KEY SOCIAL MEDIA



Twitter

- Use hashtags to gain traction – standard ones such as #LKA and #SriLanka will let your message be seen by those who follow Sri Lanka related content. Also important to choose short yet impactful hashtags for any of your campaigns, so those engaging can all literally be on the same page – hashtags allow you to collate campaign information better as well.
- Make use of Twitter moments to bring all your tweets, and related tweets, from one campaign or story into a single thread.
- Method of crowd-sourcing information – tweeting out requests for opinions/ observations allows you to make articles/write-ups richer with a wider range of voices contributing to your work.
- Use photos in your tweets, and direct players for any video/audio content. Twitter currently (as at mid 2019) allows video uploads of up to 2.20 minutes. In addition, YouTube and SoundCloud links allow for playing within the tweet itself, which is convenient for users and therefore likely to be watched/listened to more.



Facebook

- Upload any videos that you make directly to Facebook – this gives a better in-app playing experience than external links.
- Use photos in your posts and make albums for key events/campaigns/topics that include links to work on other platforms [including article link, link to Twitter hashtag].



Instagram

- Visual content is moving content; a well-captured image and informative caption can have more impact than a long, analytical article.
- Targets young people who are largely active to Instagram – they use it as their main hub for information, influence and interaction.
- Important to post regularly and to use hashtag in captions – include all hashtags after actual text so that it is less cluttered for your viewer.
- Tag individuals doing similar work/with similar interests in your posts – human rights groups, citizen journalists, etc.
- Use stories if reporting live or on a key issue, and hashtag your story with general tags such as #LKA, #SriLanka too.

In the end, however, what matters more than having the latest tech gadgets or accessories is for you to have a clear idea of what you want to communicate to whom and why.

SAFE AND ETHICAL DRONE USE

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones were best known for being used for military purposes. But in recent years they have become a civilian tool being used for many peaceful purposes. The cost of drones has also come down (an entry level unit sells for around LKR 30,000 in Colombo) while their versatility increased. This has spurred many new uses – from newsgathering and post-disaster assessments to goods delivery and smart farming.

In Sri Lanka, wedding photographers, TV journalists and political parties were among the early adopters of drones. They grasped the value of the ‘bigger picture’ perspective aerial photos or videos provide – it helps journalists and activists to make sense of complex situations like climate change impacts, resource conflicts, or political agitations. Drone-obtained visuals can enhance field-based reporting and investigative journalism.

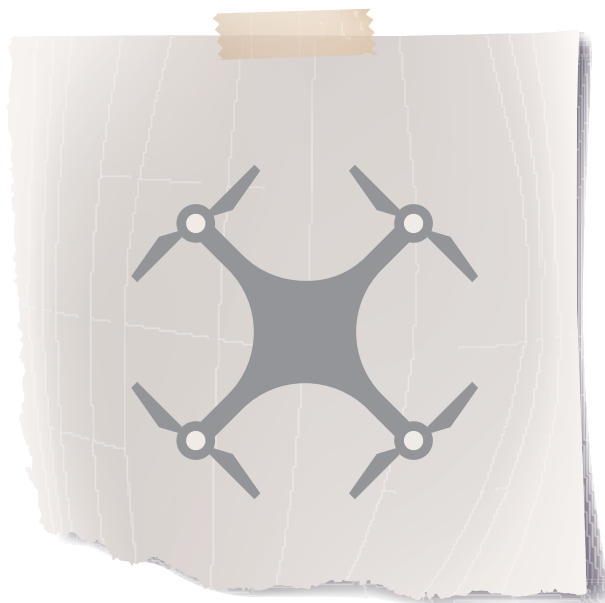
Beginning in 2016, a few dozen journalists and photojournalists have been trained in drone-assisted journalism by drone journalism enthusiast (and drone pilot) Sanjana Hattotuwa and journalist Amantha Perera. Using the bird’s eye view, some have done good stories such as probing drought’s impacts in the dry zone, rising garbage crisis in Kattankudy on the east coast, and taking a closer look at land use patterns in Hambantota.

But drones can also be misused in ways that violate people’s privacy and threaten public safety. Already some news organisations have used drones without due regard for public safety or media ethics. Example: a drone hovered over the Colombo general cemetery as slain journalist and editor Lasantha Wickrematunge’s body was exhumed in September 2016 – against the wishes of the family that had asked for privacy.

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The Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka (CAASL) has published regulations for drone operation for all users including journalists. While drones below 1 kg don't need registration with CAA, those between 1 and 25 kg do (and those over 25 kg are not permitted to fly). Even those registered cannot be flown over some specified areas which includes congested areas, roads or railway lines, national parks and security zones. The drone pilot must always maintain visual line of sight.

“We request all those who fly drones to do so with the awareness that while they may be seen as toys, in their actual use and operation, they can lead to hurt, harm and litigation if inappropriately deployed. Respecting ethics, privacy and being mindful of the safety of those under and around the theatre of flight operations must be paramount,” says a statement issued by the Ministry of Mass Media in January 2017.



Code of Ethics for Drone Journalists formulated in the United States is available at : <http://www.dronejournalism.org/code-of-ethics/>

³ Ministry of Mass Media statement on drone use: <http://www.aviationvoice.lk/drone-journalism-sri-lanka-ethics-regulations-guidelines/>

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: DIGITAL STORY-TELLING IN JAFFNA

A decade after the civil war ended, residents of Sri Lanka's Northern Province are rebuilding lives, livelihoods and communities. Entrepreneurship is spreading. Civil society is resurgent. Despite this, mainstream media still peddles stereotyped narratives, most of it negative.

"Countering foreign media that tends to stereotype us is one thing, but the content in local media too is very troubling. It thrives in polarizing our people," says young journalist and digital activist Benislos Thushan, a native of Jaffna.

This motivated him to train fellow youth in digital story-telling (DST). Already, 10 batches of young men and women have completed the six-month course that is offered free and held at the American Corner in Jaffna.

"Almost 200 students have come out of this training programme [up to mid 2019] and we are constantly updating our modules," says Thushan. "Everybody has a smartphone and likes taking pictures. But being a citizen journalist comes with greater responsibility.

"Thushan, who has worked for newspapers and also been part of peace-building initiatives, is employed in Colombo during the week and travels to Jaffna (400km north) every Friday night to conduct his classes in Jaffna during weekends.

"The aim of the DST course is to build digital story telling competencies among our youth and to promote citizen journalism," says Thushan. "By now most young people have access to smartphones. They have connectivity. Most of them love taking photos with their phones. They love sharing their stories too, but they lack guidance...My classes encourage young people to venture beyond and experiment with the digital tools they already have.

“The DST course covers the fundamentals of story-telling, photography as a visual story-telling tool, and use of social media. Participants are also taught media ethics, protecting anonymity of sources or photo subjects when requested, and being sensitive to political realities.

Every participant has to do a photo essay on a topic of her choice. Many interesting and innovative projects have emerged – some being continued online as voluntary efforts.

One participant has set up ‘Everyday Mullaitivu’ Facebook page that shares photographic vignettes of life in his area (one of Sri Lanka’s least developed districts). He features stories of positivity coming out of Mullaitivu.

Another started ‘Jaffnapedia’ with a friend. Using Instagram and Facebook pages, they seek to capture everyday sights of Jaffna’s people and places. They also invite others to send photos, which the two curators selectively share.

Thushan says: “Story telling is empowering. When you can tell stories from your own communities, you can substantially reduce the polarization caused by (mainstream) media. We want to be recognized not just a region of post-war, but also as communities with lots of hope. People are striving hard to overcome the past.

“He adds: “Those who tell our story have the power to shape that narrative. We lose our power when we lose our narrative.”

More: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/going-beyond-the-scars-of-the-civil-war/article27950495.ece>
<https://www.facebook.com/DSTjourney/>
<https://www.facebook.com/everydaymullaitivu/>
<https://www.facebook.com/jaffnapedia/>

CASE STUDY 2: SOCIAL MEDIA DECLARATION

Optimizing the benefits of social media and minimizing its misuses is the aim of the Social Media Declaration, a code of conduct for Responsible Social Media use in Sri Lanka adopted by 16 civil society groups in 2019.

It recognizes the importance of the freedom of expression on social media, yet at the same time, encourage and strengthen the ethical, progressive, democratic and pro-social use of social media.

As its dedicated website notes, “Discussion on ‘Social Media’ has come under scrutiny within the present Sri Lankan context. The resulting discourse on freedom of speech and human rights has demonstrated that there is a lack of understanding of the nuanced and complex nature of social media, democracy or freedom of expression, especially by those in decision-making positions.

“The voluntary Social Media Declaration is a civil society response to this need, intended to “create a guideline/declaration in this regard, and that it should come from within Sri Lankan media and civil society itself.”

Its objective is “to foster a community that encourages the responsible use of social media and the strengthening of digital literacy to allow for the right to access and an information-based society. While acknowledging the potential for social media to be misused, this Declaration recognizes digital rights as intrinsic to a society founded on principles of social justice, human dignity and prominent human and social ideals, based on a human rights framework.”

Signatories to the Social Media Declaration pledge to minimize and eventually eradicate the generation and spread of the following:

- Discrimination based on race, religion or caste.
- Gender-based violence (including sexism, sexual violence, misogyny and the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images and videos) and other forms of discrimination against women.
- Sexual abuse.
- Harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Violation of child rights and child exploitation, including child abuse and trafficking.
- Content inciting hate or violence, threats, intimidation, cyber-bullying and dangerous speech.
- Harassing marginalised communities.
- Illegal acts.
- Data theft and unethical abuse of sources of information and media (such as using photographs without permission).
- False information, misinformation and disinformation.
- Irresponsible sharing of explicit sexual content.

The following entities have signed the Social Media Declaration (as listed on website):

Centre for Policy Alternatives, Eastern Province Journalist Forum, Groundviews.org, Hashtag Generation, Internet Media Action, Jaffna Press Club, Lanka News Web, Law and Society Trust, Maatram.org, Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform, Nelum Yaya Foundation, Outbound Today, PEACE ECPAT Sri Lanka, Rights Now Collective for Democracy, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, Transparency International Sri Lanka, and Vikalpa.org.

More: <http://www.socialmedialanka.org/>

DISCUSSION POINTS

Here are a few questions and discussion points for further exploring this topic.

- An important element of communication is the art of listening. If you agree with this, what can be done to encourage more people to pause, reflect and then respond – rather than hurriedly participate in fleeting conversations online?
- Can you think of successful examples specific to Sri Lanka where strategic communication was used for social and public benefit?
- The discussion on digital netiquette has cited a few examples. What other examples illustrate good or bad online behaviour?
- Have you been trolled online, and if so, how did you deal with trolling?
- What would you do when you come across expressions of sexism or misogyny by your ‘friends’ in social media? Do you ignore or react (and if the latter, how?)
- Do you know of more examples of digital story-telling anywhere in Sri Lanka on any social, cultural, political or community topic?
- How is digital communication -- especially instant messaging and texting – affecting the use of language? Can you identify examples where words and phrases are abbreviated, local languages are mixed with English, and emojis enter conversations?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this module, you will have an understanding of the following:

- Today's digital tools and the web provide many opportunities for communicating fast and widely. With such great power comes great responsibility.
- Communicating is ideal when it is a two-way process. Unlike in mass media, online communications can happen in both directions, enabling better interaction and participation.
- An important element of communication is the art of listening – which we don't do enough in today's hurried digital communications. It helps to pause and reflect every now and then.
- We need to be selective and strategic about how we communicate – or we risk just expressing ourselves without being sure if anybody is listening or engaging us.
- Digital etiquette (internet etiquette or netiquette) means respecting other users' views and displaying common courtesy when posting your own views online, and when interacting with others. Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life.
- Mobile journalism is a form of digital storytelling where the primary device used for creating and editing images, audio and video is a smartphone.

FURTHER READING

Digital Storytelling: Featuring some of the digital stories produced by participants at various workshops they have facilitated over the years.

<http://stories.apc.org/>

Transformative storytelling for social change

<https://www.transformativestory.org/>

10 ways to improve your digital etiquette

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/mar/10/10-ways-to-improve-your-digital-etiquette>

'Don't feed the trolls' really is good advice – here's the evidence!

<https://theconversation.com/dont-feed-the-trolls-really-is-good-advice-heres-the-evidence-63657>

Mobile journalism manual: Guide for newsrooms and reporters

<http://www.mojo-manual.org/>

MOJO: The Mobile Journalism Handbook

<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/mojo-the-mobile-journalism-handbook>

Drone Journalism resources

<https://gijn.org/drone-journalism/>



