

No Hashtag, No Justice? How the Digital Information Space Shapes Criminal Justice

Mohosina Mostofa Mity¹

Introduction



Source: Dreamstime.com

In 2021, something terrible happened in Pakistan. A young couple in Islamabad were held at gunpoint, beaten, humiliated and filmed by a group of men. The incident could have remained another criminal case. But then the video appeared on social media. People watched it, shared it and demanded justice. Public anger grew quickly. The case became impossible to ignore. Usman Mirza, the main accused, was eventually sentenced to life imprisonment along with four others.²

Now let us move to Myanmar. On 2 May 2024, a much larger tragedy occurred in the village of Hoyyar Siri in Rakhine State. Rohingya civilians were caught in an attack by the Arakan Army.

¹Mohosina Mostofa Mity is a Research Associate at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS & MSS in International Relations from the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

² Huma Yusuf, "A Virtual Pattern," Dawn, July 12, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1634534>

Human Rights Watch later documented the killing of at least 170 people.³ Survivors returned to their village and found the remains of their relatives and neighbours. Yet the story did not capture the world's attention in the same way. It did not receive sustained international attention and only became much better documented much later. Two years later, the perpetrators had faced no meaningful accountability.

These two stories lead to an uncomfortable question. Why does one crime become a national issue while another, even when far more people are killed, slowly disappears from public attention?

Today, a crime is not only investigated in police stations and courts. It is also judged in the digital information space. A video can turn a victim into a symbol, a hashtag can create public pressure and millions of shares can make it politically costly for authorities to remain silent. But what happens when there is no video, no hashtag and no global audience? This is the darker side of our digital age. Social media has created a powerful new tool for exposing crime and demanding accountability. But it may also be creating a new inequality in justice. Some victims are seen by millions. Others remain invisible. Some cases remain in the public eye for weeks, while others disappear within hours. When visibility becomes an important part of creating pressure for accountability, those who cannot make their suffering visible may be left behind.

The question, therefore, is no longer simply whether social media helps deliver justice. The more disturbing question is whether, in today's world, no hashtag can sometimes mean no justice.

The Camera Effect

In Bangladesh, as in many other countries, we often see people taking out their phones and recording when a crime or something serious is happening instead of helping the victim. We often judge them for standing by and making videos rather than stepping forward. In many cases, this criticism is justified. But there is another side to the story. When such a video becomes viral, it can sometimes help bring a victim closer to justice. It can provide evidence, attract media attention,

³ Human Rights Watch, "Skeletons and Skulls Scattered Everywhere": Arakan Army Massacre of Rohingya Muslims in Hoyyar Siri, Myanmar (New York: Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2026), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2026/05/18/skeletons-and-skulls-scattered-everywhere/arakan-army-massacre-of-rohingya>

create public pressure and force authorities to respond. Of course, going viral does not guarantee justice, but in some cases, visibility can make a remarkable difference.

Another noteworthy point is that the camera can also change what happens next. It can sometimes stop a crime, preserve evidence and make it harder for a perpetrator to deny what happened. This is what we can call the “Camera Effect”. When a person realizes that a phone is recording them, their behaviour can change. In some incidents, perpetrators have been seen leaving the scene, trying to hide their faces or asking people to stop recording. The camera therefore does not only record criminal behaviour after it happens. Its presence can sometimes influence criminal behaviour while the incident is still taking place. This is an important distinction. Recording may not replace intervention, but it can become a form of indirect intervention. Research on video evidence also shows that recordings can affect the handling and outcome of complaints.



Source: James Law Group

There is another side to this. A person who is recording may be choosing the safest way to respond. Physically confronting an armed or violent person can put the witness and the victim at greater risk. Recording can preserve information that might otherwise disappear. It can show who was present, what happened and how the incident unfolded. In this sense, the smartphone has quietly changed the role of the bystander. The bystander is no longer only someone who watches. The bystander can become a person who creates evidence.

The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 shows why this matters. On 25 May 2020, George Floyd was arrested by police in Minneapolis after a shop employee reported that he had allegedly used a counterfeit \$20 bill. During the arrest, police officer Derek Chauvin forced Floyd to the ground and kept his knee on Floyd's neck while Floyd was handcuffed and restrained. Floyd repeatedly said that he could not breathe and eventually became unresponsive and died. What made the case especially important for understanding the Camera Effect was that a teenager named Darnella Frazier was nearby and recorded the incident on her phone. The video captured the length of the restraint and what happened around Floyd in a way that could later be examined by investigators, journalists and the public. It also revealed a serious difference between what some officers initially reported and what the video showed. During the later trial, a Minneapolis police lieutenant testified that after watching the bystander video, he realized that the account he had been given and what appeared in the recording were "totally different." Because, the initial police account described Floyd as resisting arrest and said officers used force after he became physically aggressive. However, the video showed Floyd being restrained on the ground for several minutes while repeatedly saying he could not breathe, and it did not show the level of resistance described in the initial account.⁴



Source: LA Times

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Three Former Minneapolis Police Officers Convicted of Federal Civil Rights Violations for Death of George Floyd," February 24, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/three-former-minneapolis-police-officers-convicted-federal-civil-rights-violations-death>

A 2026 study examined 12 recordings from smartphones, police body cameras and CCTV and found that bystanders also made 205 direct verbal interventions during the incident.⁵ The lesson is therefore not that recording is better than helping. It is that recording has become a new form of bystander action. Sometimes the camera may fail to stop the harm. Sometimes it may help stop a perpetrator. Sometimes it may become the evidence that allows justice to follow. The important question is no longer simply why people are recording. It is whether, in the digital age, the camera itself has become part of the crime prevention and accountability process.

The Algorithmic Lottery of Justice

When a crime happens today, getting attention can be almost as important as having evidence. A victim may record the incident and post it online, but posting a video does not mean that millions of people will see it. What people see on social media is increasingly shaped by recommendation and ranking systems that decide which posts appear more often, which remain less visible and which quickly disappear. This creates a new question for criminal justice. If public attention can put pressure on authorities, and algorithms influence public attention, are algorithms indirectly influencing which crimes receive pressure for justice?

Research already shows that social media ranking is not neutral. A 2025 study published in PNAS Nexus found that an engagement based ranking system amplified posts expressing anger and other negative emotions compared with a reverse chronological feed.⁶ Earlier research also found that positive social feedback can encourage people to express more moral outrage online, while newsfeed algorithms can influence how much attention a post receives. This matters because crime related content often contains fear, anger, shock and strong emotional images. Such material may attract the type of reaction that ranking systems are designed to reward. The result is a feedback loop. A post receives attention, attention produces more engagement, engagement can increase distribution and greater distribution creates more attention. Virality can therefore become self-

⁵Mark Levine et al., “Bystanders and the Murder of George Floyd: Analyzing Bystander Intervention in the Course of a Police Killing,” *American Psychologist* 81, no. 3 (2026): 331–343, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC13037210/>

⁶Smitha Milli et al., “Engagement, User Satisfaction, and the Amplification of Divisive Content on Social Media,” *PNAS Nexus* 4, no. 3 (2025): pgaf062, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf062>

reinforcing. Research on social media and moral panics has found that perceived virality itself can increase feelings of threat and moral outrage.

Consider one example. A 2025 study looked at 50 TikTok videos in which women publicly spoke about people they accused of harming them.⁷ The study found that TikTok's recommendation system could take these videos beyond the people who already followed the women or were looking for their stories. One of the videos received more than 28.5 million views. This meant that people who had never heard about the case could suddenly see it on their feeds. The researcher argues that this wide visibility became a way for the women to seek accountability because the more people who saw the allegations, the greater the public pressure on those accused. In other words, being seen by millions could itself become a tool for demanding action.

This raises a deeper problem. The seriousness of a crime and the amount of attention it receives are not necessarily the same thing. A crime may be horrific but difficult to film, poorly presented, emotionally less striking or shared by a small network. Another crime may be easier to capture and more likely to trigger strong reactions. The first may remain largely unseen while the second receives enormous attention. This does not mean that algorithms decide who gets justice. Courts and law enforcement remain responsible for that. But algorithms can influence which cases become visible enough to generate public pressure. That creates a new layer between a crime and society's response to it. In the past, journalists often acted as the main gatekeepers of public attention. Today, platform systems increasingly share that role.

The concern, therefore, is not simply that some crimes go viral. It is that visibility itself may become unevenly distributed by systems that neither victims nor the public fully control. If public pressure can influence criminal justice, then the unequal distribution of digital attention may quietly create an unequal distribution of pressure for justice.

Geography of Digital Justice

Imagine two victims experiencing equally serious crimes. Both have smartphones. Both can record what happened. Both can post their stories online. At first glance, they appear to have the same

⁷ Sarah Witmer, "Video Vigilantes: The Digital Fight for Vengeance Against Perpetrators on TikTok," *Social Media + Society* 11, no. 3 (2025): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251382473>

opportunity to be heard. But this is where the idea of digital equality becomes misleading. Being able to post something is not the same as being able to make people see it.

A victim living in a major city may be surrounded by journalists, lawyers, civil society organizations, activists and large online communities. If a video or testimony is posted, there are many possible routes through which it can travel. A victim living in a remote village or a conflict affected area may have none of these connections. The phone may be the same, but the network around the phone is not. This means that geography still matters in the digital age. It has simply become less visible.

The deeper problem is that information does not travel automatically. A victim first needs to tell the story. Someone needs to notice it. Someone else needs to share it. A journalist or organization may need to verify it. An influential person may need to amplify it. Only then can a local incident become a national or international issue. Every step depends on access to people and institutions that can carry information further. This creates a new form of inequality. Some victims have access to technology but not to attention. They can speak, but their voices remain within a small circle. Others have networks that can turn one post into thousands of conversations. This also changes how we should understand the digital divide. It is no longer enough to ask who has a phone or an internet connection. We should also ask who has the ability to move information from the margins to the centre of public attention.

This is the geography of visibility. In the digital age, distance is no longer measured only in kilometres. A victim can be physically close to the rest of the world and still be informationally far away. And when public attention can influence pressure for accountability, being far from attention can mean being far from justice.

The Attention Half Life of a Crime

A crime can become visible in seconds, but justice cannot move at the same speed. A video can reach millions of people within hours, create public anger and push authorities to respond. Yet the actual justice process may take months or years. Evidence must be collected, witnesses must be questioned, suspects must be investigated and courts must examine the case. By the time these steps are taking place, the public may have already moved on. This creates what can be called the attention half-life of a crime. Public attention rises quickly but often falls just as quickly. The

problem is not simply that people forget. It is that social media constantly replaces one crisis with another. The case that dominated public discussion yesterday can become almost invisible when a new story appears today.

This creates a serious gap between public pressure and legal accountability. Authorities may face enormous pressure when a case is viral, but much of the work that determines whether justice is actually achieved happens after the attention has declined. This raises an uncomfortable question. If public visibility helps push institutions to act, what happens when that visibility disappears before the process is finished? The deeper concern is that digital justice may become front loaded. The strongest public response may come at the beginning, while the less visible stages of investigation, prosecution and trial receive much less attention.

Therefore, the success of a viral case should not be measured by how many views it receives or how quickly authorities respond. The real test is whether attention can survive long enough to follow justice to its final outcome.

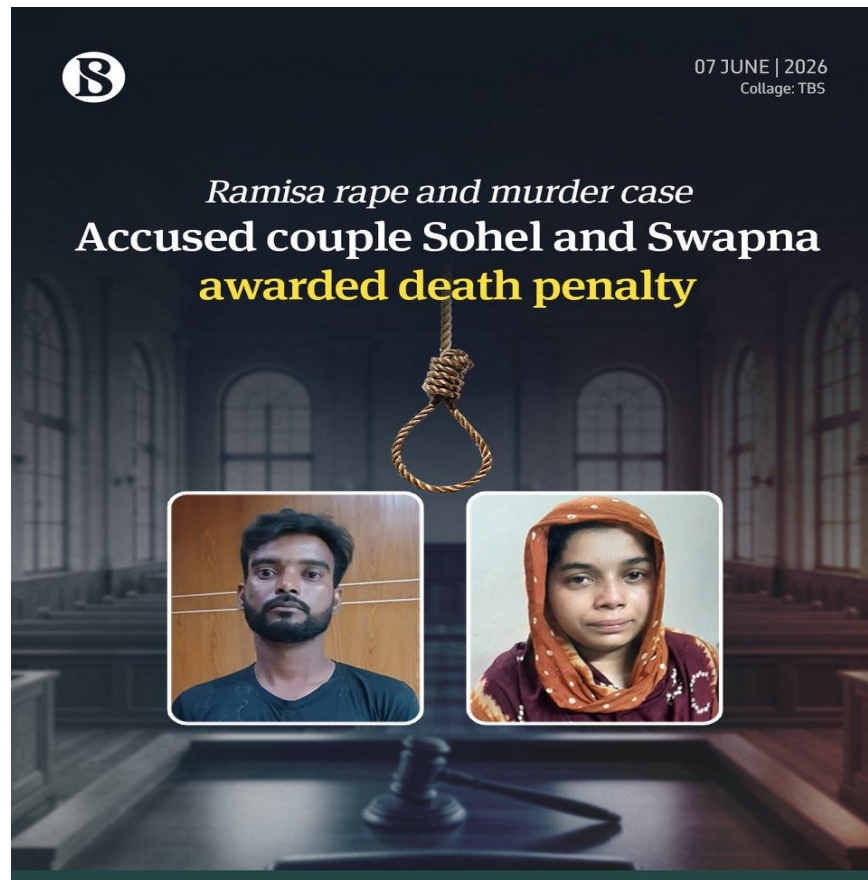
The Case of Bangladesh

Bangladesh offers a particularly interesting test of the relationship between social media and criminal justice. In recent years, several cases have shown that once a crime becomes highly visible, the state can respond with remarkable speed. For example, eight years old Ramisa Akter was raped and murdered in Pallabi on 19 May. Police submitted the charge sheet after only five days and the tribunal sentenced the two accused to death on 7 June.⁸ The case was widely discussed and public pressure for exemplary punishment was strong. The Prime Minister personally visited the victim's family at their home to offer condolences. The same pattern can be seen in less serious but revealing cases. In April 2025, a video showing a man allegedly extorting money from people in a car in Dhanmondi went viral and police detained him shortly afterwards. These cases suggest something deeper than the simple idea that social media helps victims.

The important question is why does visibility sometimes make the state move faster? The uncomfortable answer may be that visibility changes the cost of inaction. A case that thousands or millions of people are watching creates reputational and political pressure that an ordinary

⁸ "Ramisa Rape, Murder Verdict Due June 7," The Daily Star, June 4, 2026, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/crime-justice/news/ramisa-rape-murder-verdict-due-june-7>

complaint may not create. Social media can therefore act as an unofficial accountability mechanism. It does not create a new legal duty for the state. It changes the consequences of failing to perform an existing duty.



Source: The Business Standard

In Bangladesh, power structures are another major concern. When a person accused of a crime has strong political, social or economic connections, those connections can influence the course of accountability, particularly when victims, witnesses or their families are vulnerable. In some cases, when a crime is recorded and shared on social media, the person who posted the evidence may face pressure or threats to remove it and may eventually be forced to do so. This has happened and continues to happen, making it an open secret in Bangladesh. Such pressure can weaken one of the main strengths of social media, which is its ability to preserve and circulate evidence. A video may expose a crime, but exposure does not guarantee accountability when the people behind the crime have greater power than those trying to expose it. In this sense, Bangladesh shows an important

limit of digital justice. Social media can challenge traditional power structures, but it can also become another space where those structures operate.

Conclusion

The future of criminal justice will not be decided only inside police stations and courtrooms. It will also be shaped by what happens in the spaces between a crime and the public that learns about it. A phone can record a moment that would otherwise disappear. A post can connect a victim to people who were thousands of kilometres away. But technology cannot decide what is true, protect every witness or replace institutions. The real challenge is to prevent digital attention from becoming a new condition for accountability. A society should not need a viral video to recognize that a victim deserves justice. Nor should silence be mistaken for the absence of wrongdoing. The goal should be a system where evidence matters more than popularity, where institutions can act without waiting for public anger and where every victim has a meaningful path to justice, whether their story reaches a million people or remains known only to a few.