

@SouthAsia71: Academic Research Tweeted in Real Time

Written by Dave Riley

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DAVE RILEY, DEC 21 2015

@SouthAsia71 live-tweets the 1971 civil war in Pakistan. The project uses archival documents photographed at the UK National Archives (TNA) and the US National Archives (USNA), as well as infographics and occasional newspaper reports as sources to chart East Pakistan's road to independence. Over the past year the twitter feed has told the story of 1971 as if it were happening in 2015. The aim is to bring primary academic research to a broader audience and to demonstrate the potential to amplify research through use of social media. This post outlines the origin of the project and how @SouthAsia71 has covered events over the past year before looking ahead to future development.

Research carried out over the course of my thesis *UK-US Relations and the South Asian Crisis of 1971* left me with over 100,000 images of archival documents. Since only a tiny minority of these documents would end up being cited in the thesis, I was concerned that some genuinely interesting material would end up not being discussed or disseminated in any way. At the end of 2013, I was desperately looking for a way to put the "surplus" information I had gathered to good use; tweeting the events of 1971 in real time seemed to be the answer.

Live-tweeting is an idea that gained traction when, in 2011, Oxford graduate Alwyn Collinson found a degree of notoriety through his Twitter handle @RealtimeWWII. Collinson's project set out to tweet the entire Second World War, using the enormous bank of newspaper reports and photographs available online, at the very time and date that they occurred. Numerous projects have followed including Philip Cowley and Matthew Bailey's projects that have charted the rise to the Conservative Party leadership of Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Other events, including the First World War, the sinking of the Titanic and JFK's assassination have received similar treatment. Unlike the aforementioned projects that were successful in gaining substantial audiences, Pakistan's civil war cannot be considered "popular history". A year ago, I was unsure as to whether the live-tweeting of a little-known conflict using archival source material would attract any followers at all. The project was experimental from the beginning, I was intrigued to know if twitter could be a successful vehicle for public engagement with ongoing historical research.

@SouthAsia71 began tweeting on 7th December 2014, the night before Pakistan's 1970 general election. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League (AL) was eagerly awaiting a convincing majority of seats in East Pakistan, whilst Zulfikur Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party was one of many parties hoping for a solid showing in the west. Tweeting the opinions of the British and American Ambassadors, graphics detailing the results as well as news reports available on YouTube, @SouthAsia71 provided a unique insight on an historic election night.

At-a-glance pie chart showing the % of seats won by the major parties #twitterstorians #southasia71
pic.twitter.com/pHjTaackVO

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) December 8, 2014

Farland has told State that the scale of Bhutto's win was a shock to the system for West Pakistani politicians #southasia71 #history

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— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) December 11, 2014

Yahya has today sent identical messages of congratulations to Bhutto and Mujib- trying to show public even handedness #southasia71

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) December 11, 2014

[Caption: *The manner in which I've presented the information has evolved over the past year. Presenting concise, accurate, and interesting information within 140 characters has been an enjoyable challenge*]

Once the results were in, they spelled a long road ahead for a peaceful transition of power from the military government to the civilian National Assembly. The AL won a victory beyond even its leaders' wildest imagination: Mujib's party won 160 of 162 total seats in East Pakistan, which gave them enough seats for an overall majority in the National Assembly. Meanwhile, although only winning 81 seats, Bhutto's PPP had become the largest party in Pakistan's Western Wing. Now with a great deal of leverage, Bhutto was steadfastly opposed to a majority Awami League government he felt would call for the secession of East Pakistan from the West. Soon after the elections, he threatened to boycott the National Assembly and derail the democratic process if the PPP, as the largest party in the West, did not form part of the new Pakistani government. @SouthAsia71 covered in detail the responses of the British and American missions as they relayed information on the imminent political stalemate and showed grave concern for Pakistan's future.

The project then tracked the constitutional phase of the crisis in early 1971/2015. Holding a belief that stability on the subcontinent was the best means of deterring communist infiltration, the British and Americans looked to remain aloof from the crisis (Scott, 2011 p81). Previous interjections, most recently over the India-Pakistan conflict of 1965 had left the British, in particular, with a low standing in South Asia (Colman, 2009 p469). This did not, however, prevent British and American officials from revealing their thoughts on the matter and sending home vivid reports of the negotiations. There was evident sympathy for the Bengali cause among both the UK and US missions in Dacca, whilst PPP leader Bhutto was generally disliked; British High Commissioner to Pakistan Sir Cyril Pickard notably described the former foreign minister as "utterly unscrupulous" (TNA, FCO 37/870).

Throughout the crisis, British and American officials believed in the best intentions of Pakistan's President, Yahya Khan (USNA, State Department Record Group 59 Box 2528 POL Pak-US). Yahya had assumed the presidency in March 1969 with a mandate to transfer power from the military dictatorship to a civilian government elected on the basis of universal suffrage. The rules he laid out for the elections, or Legal Framework Order, decreed that the National Assembly members must agree on a new constitution for Pakistan, to be approved by the President, within 120 days of its convening. If a new constitution was not agreed, the Assembly would be dissolved and elections re-held. Tweets by @SouthAsia71 sourced from British and American diplomats on the ground speak of a President becoming more and more fatalistic in what are interpreted as genuine hopes for peace. There is a marked change from late December when Yahya told US Ambassador Joseph Farland that he was pleased that the election had thrown up the semblance of a two-party system, to their meeting on 25th February in which Yahya ominously warned that "blood and chaos might ensue" if Bhutto and Mujib did not come to an agreement (USNA RG 59 Box 2526 Pol 15-1 Pak).

Mujib has announced a Hartal (general strike) to begin in Dacca, in response to the postponement of the Assembly #Bangladesh

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) March 1, 2015

Listen live to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech, Dacca Racecourse 7th March 1971 <http://t.co/i6MA66G5xH> #Bangladesh #twitterstorians

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) March 7, 2015

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[Caption: *Throughout the project, I've looked to provide links to other resources in order to provide as broad a perspective as possible for @SouthAsia71's followers*]

For all his professed desire for a peaceful outcome, Yahya was willing to go to any lengths to ensure that East Pakistan did not secede. On March 7th, @SouthAsia71 tweeted a link to a recording of Mujib's speech at Dacca racecourse. After Yahya had again delayed the convening of the National Assembly a few days earlier, many feared the AL leader would unilaterally declare independence for East Pakistan under its new name of Bangladesh (Raghavan, 2013 p41). Rather than declare independence, Mujib laid out preconditions for the Awami League's participation in the National Assembly and demanded that the transfer of power happen immediately. Such a rapid transfer of power would prove difficult. Yahya was insistent that Mujib and Bhutto agree on a constitution before the National Assembly could be called. Frantic negotiations had produced nothing since the elections in December. Even so, a new date, March 25th, was again set for the convening of the National Assembly.

Reports coming in that the deal has been agreed- optimism is abound in British and American circles #coldwarhist

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) March 24, 2015

Reports of fires and machine gun fire at Dacca university- East Pakistan is in a state of chaos #Bangladesh

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) March 25, 2015

[Caption: *@SouthAsia71's tone shifted dramatically between March 24th and March 25th*]

In the days leading up to March 25th, @SouthAsia71 revealed a distinct sense of optimism among British diplomats in particular. There were reports from negotiations that, astoundingly, a settlement may have been near (TNA, FCO 37/870). Tragically, hopes for a peaceful solution were premature. Subsequent research suggests that negotiations in March were a ploy to allow time for military preparations for the West Pakistani regime. On the night of March 25th/26th, the army enacted a brutal crackdown on the Bengali nationalist movement in Dacca. AL members, intellectuals and the Hindu minority were particular targets for the systematic murder of civilians. The US consulate in Dacca estimated that 6,000 people were killed in that one night (USNA RG 59 Box 2530 Pol 23-9 Pak).

Leaked Document- Memo for Nixon- up to 6,000 dead in East Pakistan #coldwarhist pic.twitter.com/4vR1yWJlhK

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) April 3, 2015

"Selective Genocide": US Amb. to India Keating sends cable in support of US mission in Dacca #Coldwarhist pic.twitter.com/K2HfQ1TRec

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) March 30, 2015

[Caption: *US government documents that are in the public domain can be reproduced without copyright infringement. This means I can provide @SouthAsia71's followers with easy access to primary material. I provide full references on request*]

UK and US missions in Dacca evocatively reported the atrocities. These reports include what has become known as "The Blood Telegram", sent by US Consul General in Dacca, Archer Blood, to the US State Department on 28th March. Entitled "Selective Genocide", the message describes the staff of the Consulate as "mute and horrified witnesses" to the acts carried out by the Pakistani Army (USNA RG 59 Box 2530 Pol 23-9 Pak). In the following days, British Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca Frank Sargeant reported on the "reign of terror" perpetuated by Yahya's forces that included a massacre at Dacca University (TNA, PREM 15/567). Followers of @SouthAsia71 witnessed a blow by blow diplomatic account of one of the darkest moments in Pakistan's history. The handle also linked to a NBC news report from 1972 that shows the piling of bodies outside a dorm at Dacca University.

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The British and American missions continued to report on the atrocities throughout April and May, at times laying criticism at the door of their respective governments. Such dissent saw both Blood and Sargeant removed from post by early June (Blood, 2002 p232). Blood objected to the US government's continued lack of condemnation for Yahya's regime. Replies from the State Department insisted that the incident be treated as an internal matter for Pakistan (USNA RG 59 Box 2530 Pol 23-9 Pak). However, unknown to Blood, the State Department, and all but a select few, President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger held further motives for the tacit support of the Pakistani regime. With the use of infographics, @SouthAsia71 covered Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing for a meeting with Chinese premiere Zhou en-Lai in July. As a mutual ally of the US and China, Yahya had played a crucial role in facilitating talks between the two and was crucial to the White House plan to improve relations with China. Therefore, in Nixon and Kissinger's opinion, the US needed to remain steadfast in its support of the Pakistani government to prove its worth as an ally not only to China, but also to Middle Eastern states involved in the containment of the Soviet Union (Kissinger, 1979 pp901-902). Once this was achieved, the US could increase its leverage over the Soviet Union via closer links with the Chinese.

Kissinger isn't happy at news of Indo-Sov Treaty. White House sees Treaty as de facto alliance #coldwarhist
pic.twitter.com/1tpWCWBFS3

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) August 9, 2015

"At no time has any official of our gmnt..condemned the brutal and systematic repression"- Ted Kennedy 7/12/71
pic.twitter.com/m7uaG0n7ez

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) December 8, 2015

[Caption: *Over the year I have altered my style of infographics, to an easily understood photograph and text format. I have also incorporated a degree of branding, with the addition of the @SouthAsia71 logo in the bottom right hand corner. The photographs of Kissinger and Kennedy are both available via creative commons for free reuse with modification]*

The British policy toward the crisis differed from that of the US. Like the State Department, the UK government suffered as a result of the utmost secrecy that had surrounded the China initiative. The White House's cloak of secrecy remained until Nixon announced on July 15th that he be the first US president to visit communist China in early 1972. Also in common with the State Department, British sympathies on the subcontinent leant toward India as it became clear that India would soon become the dominant force on the subcontinent (Smith, 2010 p457). In August India and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of friendship in response to the emerging US-Pakistan-China axis in South Asia. @SouthAsia71's documents demonstrated the different approaches taken by the UK and US governments. Where Kissinger saw the treaty as a de facto alliance, British officials took a softer line in seeing it as an Indian hedge in exchange for Soviet influence in New Delhi (Kissinger, 1979 p866; Smith, 2010 p456).

Different UK and US approaches continued as the crisis came to a head in December. Since their escape from Dacca in March, Bengali forces known as the Mukti Bahini had, with Indian support been fighting Pakistani forces throughout 1971. Continued violence in East Pakistan had caused over ten million people to cross the border into India, which in turn put pressure on the Indian government for action. Military build-up by both India and Pakistan in border regions during October and November sparked activity at the UN where a number of countries put together prospective Security Council Resolutions (Dixit, 2002 pp212-213). @SouthAsia71 clearly charted the disconnect in British and American opinion, as the US looked to a resolution calling for a mutual pullback. The British were more sensitive to Indian protestations against being labelled as the aggressor (Scott, 2011 p92). Action on the UN Security Council proved to be a moot point in any case, as the Soviet Union used its veto over any resolution unacceptable to India.

At the time of writing (11th December 2015) @SouthAsia71 is currently live-tweeting the brief Indo-Pakistan war that brought an end to the crisis. Focus is upon the events on the ground as well as the dramatic US policy that resulted in Nixon authorising the movement of a nuclear armed naval task force to the Bay of Bengal. The move was designed to

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ward off an Indian attack on West Pakistan, an attack most commentators did not believe was about to occur. The live-tweeting aspect of the project will end on 18th December, two days after the surrender of the Pakistan Army in Dacca after just 13 days of conflict.

"Indians...are the devious, trickiest sons-of-bitches we know" for full Nixon/Kissinger thoughts on 8/12/71 see <https://t.co/qZv4dHqAcG>

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) December 8, 2015

Pakistan Gmnt has released a White Paper entitled "The Crisis in East Pakistan" Full text is available at <http://t.co/d3XIA2LJ21>

— South Asia 71 (@SouthAsia71) August 5, 2015

[Caption: @SouthAsia71 always looks to link to external sites in order to guide followers to further avenues of investigation]

My immediate plans are to replay tweets from the past year in the coming months whilst I prepare the next stage of the project, which is to chart the personal stories of those involved. @SouthAsia71 will continue to draw upon archival sources but will also cite research carried out over the past 44 years. The project has done this to a certain extent over the past twelve months, but in future the twitter feed will post more links to scholarly work, in order to provide a showcase for authors in the field and to broaden the base of source material for @SouthAsia71's followers.

The wider aim for the project is to build upon the prototype website www.southasia71.weebly.com in order to provide a comprehensive resource for the study of the birth of Bangladesh. Plans are in place to host blogs and provide access to downloadable archive material and transcriptions. @SouthAsia71 also has great potential as a teaching tool: it could easily form part of a module that brings primary evidence to undergraduates at an early stage of their degree programme. The project also contributes to the efforts made by archivists to increase the accessibility and usability of government documents.

The project has seen a great deal of positive engagement. Popular tweets can reach upwards of 5,000 people and @SouthAsia71's profile currently averages around 3,000 visits per month. The project is followed by over 1,500 people, some of whom are ex-Ambassadors, distinguished authors and prominent journalists. Many followers have asked questions to which I've enjoyed responding and providing clarifications and further information where necessary. Through the project I've made a number of interesting contacts and have been invited to speak to academic audiences about my work. Above all, however, running @SouthAsia71 has been an enjoyable experience. Engaging the public with my academic pursuits has been a joy that I look forward to continuing.

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About the author:

Dave Riley is a PhD candidate at Cardiff University currently writing his thesis *UK-US Relations and the South Asian Crisis of 1971*. He is due to speak about @SouthAsia71 at the British Association of South Asian Studies annual conference, 9-11 April at the University of Cambridge.