

I've no idea who these candidates are, but they surely sell hard



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

If the heavens are kind this time and everything pans out as expected by the mayoral wannabes, a golden age for Dhaka is now within reach. So mark your calendar for

February 1, the day your beloved city goes into labour and gives birth to a new pair of mayors to look after its two wings for the next five years. Whether you're a voter or not, whether you believe in electoral pledges or not, whether you abhor giant leaps of faith or not, whether you're weary of the routineness of it all or not—you must love the sound coming out of the campaign trail at the moment.

Welcome to Dhaka 2.0—or as Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh would like to call it, "New City", or Atiqul Islam, "Smart City", or Tabitha Awal, "Intelligent City", or Ishraq Hossain, "World-Class Metropolis". Meet the four visionaries behind Dhaka's rebirth, aka the four frontrunners in the mayoral race backed respectively by Awami League and BNP in the two wings of the city. The candidates may sort out the nomenclature between them if they want but let us take a look at their vision for the city's planned transformation. It's chaotic, somewhat unreal, but oddly beautiful. It's easier to imagine this picture in terms of Cubist shards: a flash of a clear sky; glimpses of people roaming around freed-up lakes and canals; clean, spacious roads; "smart" neighbourhoods; electric buses running through the city; public toilets at every corner; multi-storeyed parking complexes dotting the downtown; basic civic facilities for all; one-stop service for all certificates and trade licences; community centres and gymnasiums in each ward; skywalks; footbridges with escalators; basically, a state within a state where everyone is safe, healthy and picture-perfect.

In the Dhaka of our Fantastic Four, there is no corruption, no traffic, no air pollution, no water-logging, no mosquito—zilch.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPILOB

To be frank, I have no idea who these candidates are. Beyond the obvious highlights forced down my throat every time I watch TV or read a newspaper, my knowledge about our potential city fathers is that of a toddler about his toys, with little background information. The four candidates are well-bred and well-educated, I am told, all coming off as equally electable and competent to take up the challenge. I see pictures and videos showing them on the streets, approaching people with a warm smile and a list of deliverables. Whatever they're selling—through their leaflets and manifestos, their rallies, their door-to-door campaigns, their live videos, the promotional tracks that keep blaring in the street, collapsing the sense of space and perspective—they surely sell hard.

They make you take notice.

As for their merchandise—a golden age for Dhaka—I remain eternally enthused. I remember writing an op-ed about the city of my dream which shares some of the elements of their dream city, but I must admit, mine pales in comparison to the glitz and glamour that they plan to bring to this city. It may seem like a modern-day utopia or a sensory overload for the unaccustomed brains of residents, but the four seem to think it is possible, although they are scant on details about why they think so. Come February, this fantasyland will be ours to ravage and exploit as we wish, right?

Let's entertain this thought for a while before we move on to a more sobering question: will the heavens

be so kind as to allow our mayors to remember their pledges once the honeymoon period is over and actually do something about them? An even more sobering question is: can the mayors, who are executive heads of the city corporations, do something even if they want to give their pathetic lack of power and jurisdiction over the forty-plus government bodies and organisations that basically run the city? One candidate has floated the idea of a metropolitan government system. Given how Dhaka has expanded over the years and its myriad problems that keep piling up, perhaps the time is right for a radical reform in how the city is run. But can a mayor do that? There is no denying that democracy in Bangladesh has had a rough go of it lately, leading

to a profound distrust of any political commitment. If there is cynicism about the magical sound bites coming out of the campaign trail of the mayoral candidates, it is precisely because of that. And other obvious reasons as stated above.

Strangely enough, despite the apparent novelty of some of their ideas, they are basically reading from an old handbook. Almost everything they are saying has already been said. Too many times. By too many people. In too many city corporations. Clearly, the appeal has not faded yet. Many of these pledges were also on the agenda of the candidates in the first mayoral polls of a bifurcated Dhaka in 2015. It's as if progress in the mayoral brainwaves has stalled, frozen in time five years ago and impossible to add to, even as the city continues to be hit by new waves of problems and challenges. In the thirty years of the history of the city corporation system in Dhaka, every mayor came with the promise to make the city a better place but left it in a worse state than it was before, not for their own fault always. The gulf between the pledges made and the reality on the ground remains unbridged.

On my way home the other night, I was stopped by a tricycle-bound old man begging for alms. As I was about to talk to him, a campaign van of one of the candidates swept past me, with a pre-recorded message blaring from its loudspeakers. The message was an emotionally-charged invitation to the people to vote for him because he is loved by everyone, and only he, and no one else, can deliver. I was struck by the contrast between the two incidents of begging: one meant the difference between life and death, and the other used the pretence of knowingsness to demand votes as a fast track to power. Dhaka can do without the latter; but it must address the condition of the former—for these poor, helpless people who have no stake in the glitz of a smart city are the ones by whom the health of a city is measured.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. Email: badiuzzaman.bg@gmail.com

To believe or not to believe

Social media and the risk of false news content



SAAM HASAN

TODAY, we live in a world more dependent on digital platforms than ever before. Everything an average person requires, from ordering food to finding an emergency doctor, can be done with a few taps on some smart device. The same is also true for information. As an example, a research carried out by the Pew Research Centre found 55 percent of the American adult population to fall in the categories of "often" and "sometimes" with regards to how much they use social media as their source of information. While the exact metric for Bangladesh is not yet established, it is a safe presumption that most of us follow a similar pattern.

The number of Facebook users in Bangladesh registers at somewhere between 25 to 30 million, according to a report published by Digiology in April, 2018. With this increasing reliance on social media posts and pages for information, we now find ourselves in a situation where this reliance has been exploited to no end by entities relying on clickbait and false news as their chosen business model. The question now arises,

how do we, the average citizen, know when to believe a particular piece of information?

Before getting to how we can filter the legitimate from the made-up, let's get a better idea of how informative content is often framed and presented on platforms such as Facebook. First and foremost, we have the misleading headlines. Although it is pretty self-explanatory given the widespread use of clickbait tactics these days, it still serves us well to be reminded of how this works.

So many times, we see articles with an extremely eye-catching headline and one that is often a prelude to a sensational new development or discovery. Yet when you delve into the article, you realise that the actual information is not what was advertised. Sometimes the wording of a headline is intentionally obscure, other times it takes a certain incident completely out of context in order to create more intrigue among consumers. A classic example would be an article from the Express that was doing the rounds following the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. The headline insinuated that Iran had deployed its jets in "Western Skies". Inevitably, this invoked a belief that Iran had infringed on foreign skies, whereas the truth was that the Iranian Air Force had only increased its vigilance along its own western border.

We see a headline, we are drawn to it, and we hit the share button without actually bothering to read the entire piece and find out the heart of the matter.

Secondly, another tactic often used by various sites and outlets is the recycling of past content that is somehow relevant to current events. On many occasions, pages will share articles from quite some time back just because something that happened recently can be linked with it. Going back to the Iran-US standoff once more, another news piece doing the rounds was the joint military exercise being conducted by Iran, Russia and China. Instinctively, people jumped to the conclusion that it was in response to the recent escalation and that it underlined Russia and China's

willingness to militarily support Iran if a conflict broke out. Except the reality was, this exercise had been conducted months before the Soleimani killing even took place, meaning there was no reactionary element to it whatsoever.

Now that we have reminded ourselves of the various social media news traps, how do we navigate them? Luckily for us, there are a few clear indicators that can help guide the decision. Most of these are basic criteria that are so obvious that they shouldn't really need any re-introduction, but sadly as a consequence of the short attention span we are willing to dedicate to news content on social media, it often gets lost in the back of our minds.

The first of these is of course the source. It goes without saying that an article from the New York Times comes with a greater assurance of legitimacy compared to one from pleaseshareourstory.com. At this point, I genuinely won't be surprised if the latter somehow does exist. It is also important to know the difference between news sources and the sites that simply report news. The former refers to newspapers, channels, etc. that serve as the primary sources of news. The latter refers to websites who simply report the stories published and broken by the primary sources. Whenever you are reading an article from such a website, always pay

attention to the sources they cite.

The second, and the most important way of protecting yourself from misinformation, is to simply read the thing. While it may seem strange having to break this down, this is in fact one of the major problems we have today when it comes to social media usage. We see a headline, we are drawn to it, and we hit the share button without actually bothering to read the entire piece and find out the heart of the matter. And as we have already seen, news articles on social media are the kind of books that are impossible to judge by their covers.

Social media has made information accessible on a scale hitherto unheard of. It has been one of the great inventions of our time and has had an undoubtedly positive impact in the world. However like all things, it brings with it its own cons. Hence, it falls on us, the users, to be vigilant and protect ourselves from false information. Don't believe a headline for what it says, read the entirety of the article before hitting that share button, and make sure to check the source for reliability. Information can be the greatest weapon in the world—use it wisely.

Saam Hasan is predominantly a computational biologist by day and pop culture writer by night, but his interests include anything that is relevant to society today.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

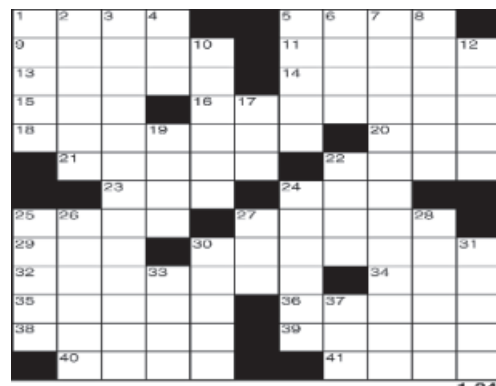


JANUARY 30, 1948
Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi

Indian lawyer, politician, social activist, and writer, Mahatma Gandhi who became the leader of the nationalist movement against the British rule of India, was assassinated by an orthodox Hindu Brahman.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Spot for shingles
 - 5 Bill stamp
 - 9 Customary
 - 11 The Yokum boy
 - 13 Blasting stuff
 - 14 Burn a bit
 - 15 Rage
 - 16 Coast Guard boats
 - 18 Ecstatic state
 - 20 Stephen of "The Crying Game"
 - 21 Hit, in the Bible
 - 22 Work on jerky
 - 23 Low digit
 - 24 "The Simpsons" bartender
 - 25 Cause of ruin
 - 27 Fails miserably
- DOWN**
- 1 Quarrel
 - 2 God of the dead
 - 3 Asian nation
 - 4 Distant
 - 5 Elbows on the table
 - 6 Somewhat
 - 7 Scottish islands
 - 8 College award
 - 10 Find
 - 12 Viewed anew
 - 17 French article
 - 19 Arbor climber
 - 22 Show up
 - 24 Strolls along
 - 25 Puffy flier
 - 26 Reception aid
 - 27 Entreat
 - 28 "The Iron Lady" star
 - 30 Hamlet extras
 - 31 Laced with profanity
 - 33 Billionth: Prefix
 - 37 Corrida cry



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SCOT BOARS
HUMOR ALLEE
IRENE MALTA
PIG SEAFOAM
SEACOW VIE
BREW END
LASTHERS
GIN SUET
GANT SEADOG
SEAWED APE
PACED LATENT
AGING EXERT
TEDDY ERAS

BETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.