

Paradox of analogue life in a digital age



SABBIH AHMAD

LAST Christmas break, I took my daughter out to dinner when she flew in to see me in Vancouver. We decided to go to a Vietnamese restaurant to get the traditional pho, a warm bone broth soup with savoury beef chunks and hearty noodles. As I sipped my delicious pho and caught up with my daughter about her work and life as a recent graduate mining engineer, I glanced around the restaurant to observe my fellow patrons. Dozens of people were sitting at their tables, and a good number of them had their heads down, fiddling their smartphones while waiting for their food to be served. Their eyes darted up and down the screen, and they would only look up briefly when answering or asking a question. The endless screen watching, even in social settings always made me wonder "what is the point?" A few questions also swirl around in my head. How did the world wide web take over our analogue lives? What is so mesmerising about our handheld devices that amounts to this level of addiction?

I have been self-quarantined in my home for over a month now in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where I moved back recently from Vancouver, Canada. In this lockdown state, I continue to work from home and connect with my colleagues all over the country including some from our company headquarters in Kuala Lumpur and my boss, who is stuck in Yangon due to the travel restrictions. We participate in many team meetings throughout the day using online audio-visual aids. Our company also conducted several virtual townhalls with hundreds of employees in virtual attendance. However, in most cases, we try to avoid video calls due to the bandwidth limitations.

I also converse with a few of my

colleagues in Vancouver to discuss a few initiatives that we started much before I left. The time difference works to my benefit since I can arrange my interactions before going to bed. Over the last few days, I have done several transactions through a mobile financial app called *bKash*. My wife was able to get groceries delivered at home by placing orders on a website, while I paid for cable TV, internet, electricity and phone bills using my smartphone. My teenage daughter who goes to an English medium school, becomes preoccupied during the school hours as she attends online classes from the comfort of her room. Some weeknights are spent having family time, watching YouTube or Netflix.

Seemingly, the internet has become the answer to a myriad of challenges ensuing from the strict nationwide measures to halt the transmission of the COVID-19. Many of the activities that are being conducted digitally today would have been performed through analogue means otherwise. Bridging our analogue lives to the digital world make us happily relieved during the lockdown and facilitate social distancing. That said, I still miss going to the office, meeting my colleagues, or going out for a walk to have some fresh air.

The unanswered paradox is that many of us are too immersed in our digital world while living analogue lives in normal times; we are able to do everything and anything without ever needing physical human interaction today.

From shopping groceries, virtual classrooms, online consultation with a physician or working from home to enjoy digital contents could have been the way of life today if the majority of the population were able to use most of these modalities. However, the reality is different with almost half of the world population without access to the internet. The so-called *digital divide* becomes worse when the least developed countries are considered. It also has a gender bias impacting women more than men.

Since its inception, *digital divide* is just not only a local phenomenon but also a global one. More than one billion children across the globe are unable to attend remote learning while locked at home due to COVID-19 restrictions now. Even in developed countries, internet access is often lower than perceived. Paradoxically, amidst the technological prowess of the United States of America, 12

and communication technology (ICT) to bridge the digital divide by adopting technologies and improving knowledge base. Some indicators suggest that reasonable progresses have been made; for example, last year Bangladesh advanced to the rank of 115 out of 193 counties in the UN E-Governance Index climbing 35 steps since 2012. Government policies and initiatives have offered a positive atmosphere in

sector offices are using the benefits of the large-scale *digitalisation* that the government has strived for over the years. As of February 2020, the number of mobile connections per capita in Bangladesh was equivalent to 99 percent of the total population, less than 20 percent of them had a smartphone. These numbers are 65 percent and 45 percent, respectively when the whole world is considered. Although Internet subscription in Bangladesh stood at almost 100 million, the broadband connectivity stayed at less than 6 million according to the data from the nation's regulatory body BTRC. The household computer ownership in 2019 was less than 6 percent, as per ITU.

The key focus of the digitalisation efforts either in local or global scenarios has mostly been on technology. This approach has offered a significant thrust for Bangladesh to address aspects of the digital divide in terms of ICT capabilities. Yet, the root cause of this divide is not just limited to technology, there are a number of other factors, such as income disparity, education level, geography and infrastructure playing a critical role in widening or closing the chasm.

With the small percentage of computers in households, limited broadband internet and the relatively low penetration of smartphones in Bangladesh, the paradox of digital divide may continue even when there might be a call for adopting many of the digital avenues explored today to become our way of life. We would have to relentlessly pursue our aspirations to become a true digital Bangladesh in a post COVID-19 world that may ultimately save us from our overcrowded capital city, its infamous traffic jams, pollution and enhanced public safety in the coming days. It finally started to dawn on me what was so magical about our handheld devices and why we needed to stay virtually connected more now than ever before.

Sabbir Ahmad, Director, Engineering at edotco Group. Email: sabbir@ieee.org.



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PHOTO: STAR

million children in middle class homes are growing up without internet connection. In rural America, 19 million households still lack internet connectivity. Globally, 87 percent of the population in developed countries are connected to the Internet, compared to 47 percent in developing nations, and a mere 19 percent in impoverished countries.

In the context of Bangladesh, the nation has made impressive progress and was on track to become a middle-income economy by 2021, until the arrival of COVID-19. Governments have coined the *Sustainable Development Goals* to achieve their "Vision 2021". A major impetus was on information

implementing the roadmap toward a *Digital Bangladesh*. Today, many of us are enjoying the fruits of digitisation while being locked down at home.

However, there is a growing concern about the majority of the population continuing to live on the wrong side of the digital divide. They do not have reliable tools or means to connect to the Internet. This is not only limiting working from home or attending classes online but also defeating the greater purpose of a *Digital Bangladesh*. Except for a few private institutions, the online classroom is almost non-existent during this lockdown. The same applies to the work from home modality as only a handful of private

A choice between death by COVID-19 or famine

MOHAMMAD TARIQUR RAHMAN

IT has been more than a month since the world has been under lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of deaths will soar if the predicted second and third waves and the "biblical" famine—as UN warns—come true.

Are we then racing for a massive humanitarian catastrophe? If so, perhaps future generations will remember the COVID-19 pandemic as the biggest humanitarian catastrophe in human history!

At the beginning of this pandemic, the majority of the victims were elderly. Later the number of younger victims started to mount. Then the "rationing" of the healthcare system was chosen to save healthier and/or younger people who had more chances of recovery.

Healthcare rationing is arguably a painful paradox because of the differences in the boundary of "egalitarian" ethos, and the availability of resources. These are based on fostering the dilemma—if death should/could be delayed. Nonetheless, moral apriority in that "cruel" choice of rationing—a choice between life and death—remains a concern.

In fact, the pandemic has given us a pounding realisation to fathom the depth between life and death. We realised that the COVID-19 death sentence could fall upon any of us at any time. The reality is, we can die at any time with or without COVID-19. Yet we never thought of death as much as we are thinking about it during this pandemic!

By all means, we want to escape



United Nations' food relief agency has warned that the world is at risk of widespread famines 'of biblical proportions' caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: AFP

an early death sentence from the coronavirus.

Because of the lack of an effective vaccine/drug, lockdown became the best option to escape any unexpected death. To avoid any chances of getting in touch with the deadly virus, suspected COVID-19 patients were found abandoned; ousted COVID-19 patients wandered helplessly; and dead COVID-19 patients were left unattended in old homes, on the street, or even inside their house for hours to days.

We wanted to complete the full course of a nice life ourselves. We have chosen life over death.

However, given the lockdown's

success to curb the virus's claim of human lives, to ease our frustration for being locked down for so long, or to restore economic growth, many countries are slowly withdrawing or relaxing the lockdown. The hard fact is, everyone knows that both silent and actively infected coronavirus carriers are out there. And neither do we have an effective vaccine, nor a drug, yet.

In effect, what is happening now is what the "herd immunity" advocates have been endorsing from the beginning. Looks like we are going back to square one—creating the breeding ground for the next waves of the pandemic!

No doubt some have achieved what

they wanted to with the lockdown—flattening the death curve. Ironically, that also perpetuated global starvation towards a larger famine—the biblical one!

Now after a month of lockdown, we are facing a different choice—a choice between death by COVID-19 and/or death by the biblical famine. Our rationale to justify our measures at the beginning of the pandemic to save our own lives in lieu of the "less valuable" old folks, or by preventing the spread of deadly infections to save millions of lives may sound hypocritical if we ignore the millions of people in many parts of the world whose dream of living is about to end.

In fact, thousands of men, women, and children of all ages are already dying in imposed wars, famine, or ethnic cleansing. Our deplorable ignorance to that death toll has made the slaughter of humans a norm of modern civilisation! Similarly, we might ignore the death toll due in the upcoming global famine.

In a recent virtual session of the UN Security Council, David Beasley, UN World Food Programme Executive Director, cautioned "an additional 130 million people could be pushed to the brink of starvation by the end of 2020". Ironically, the amount of food that goes to waste in Europe and in the USA alone could feed the world population three times over, yet more than 20,000 people starve to death every day. And this number will increase to 300,000 per day, as David Beasley cautioned! The reality is, every human life is equally important. Everyone deserves to live a full life.

Once we are born, death is inevitable. Obviously, whether we will continue living or leave this world, is not in our control. But what we can do while we are alive, is in our control. And before we embrace death, we should want to fulfil the purpose of life as a human—serving humanity.

It is the coronavirus that perhaps helped us realise the value of our own life—let's not limit that realisation for ourselves only. There are "others" who helplessly become a victim of national or global political plays.

The global leaders have proven themselves to be resolute in the fight against COVID-19. In the same vein, the world can stand united to protect the lives of those who are becoming the victims of famine, ethnic cleansing, or imposed wars.

With the technology that is available, it is not impossible to share millions of gallons of milk instead of dumping it into the drain, thousands of tons of vegetables instead of smashing them into the ground, millions of tons of packed food before throwing those away, or millions of eggs instead of letting them spoil. These "compelled" acts of wasting food are not new—it is a part of the mechanism to maintain the balance in the demand-supply chain and run the economy. And it could be stopped. Unlike our "cruel" choice in the beginning of the lockdown, we can be a bit more "generous" to prevent unexpected deaths due to the forthcoming famine or wars.

Mohammad Tariqur Rahman is professor, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Malaya.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



NELSON MANDELA INAUGURATED AS PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

May 10, 1994

Nelson Mandela, whose efforts to end apartheid led to his imprisonment (1962-90) and earned him a share (with F W de Klerk) of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, became president of South Africa this day in 1994.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Germany's Merkel
 - 7 Party thrower
 - 11 Like vistas
 - 12 State frankly
 - 13 Deli order
 - 15 Nut part
 - 16 Factual
 - 18 Bulls or Bears
 - 21 Harvest
 - 22 Blew one's top
 - 24 Work phone no.
 - 25 Swindle
 - 26 Life story, for short
 - 27 Matched up
 - 29 Corrals
 - 30 Seasonal song
 - 31 Apple center
 - 32 Burglar's bane
 - 34 Mexican holiday
 - 40 Leave out
 - 41 Judged
 - 42 Lights-out tune
 - 43 Breaks apart
- DOWN**
- 1 Fire result
 - 2 Corp. or Sgt.
 - 3 Hair goo
 - 4 Finishes
 - 5 Flexible
 - 6 Dull pain
 - 7 Ophelia's love
 - 8 Eggs, in Latin
 - 9 Tofu base
 - 10 Binary base
 - 14 Rocker John
 - 16 LBJ, for one
 - 17 Math comparison
 - 19 Fossil resin
 - 20 Bangor's state
 - 21 GOP member
 - 22 Zeus or Apollo
 - 23 Uno doubled
 - 25 Viola's cousin
 - 28 Gasps, perhaps
 - 29 Saddle part
 - 31 Move furtively
 - 33 Throws in
 - 34 Guest's bed
 - 35 "... little teapot
 - 36 Wee bite
 - 37 French friend
 - 38 So far
 - 39 Takes too much, briefly



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

F A S T S I S L E T
 A L O H A N A I V E
 D E B I T A D M I T
 N U T S O L E
 D U C K P I N S
 A N A T S A H A R A
 T I T A N P A L E R
 A T O N A L R O A M
 K N I C K E R S
 R A M N E A T
 A L I B I S A L S A
 V E N U E K N E E S
 E X I T S S K I T S

BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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