

Internet and mobile phone

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SALAHUDDIN OMER

"DIGITAL Bangladesh" is on the lips of every intellectual, academic and government official, regardless of their specialisation. Undoubtedly, everyone has some pertinent angle -- therein lies the problem. We have a sea of conversations on the same subject, making it hard to find fresh ideas. Having said this, I'd like to refer to a discussion about Digital Bangladesh that made me sit up and think.

Nokia and Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) organised an interesting discussion titled "Progressing Bangladesh towards an Information Society," which provided a lot of food for thought on digitalisation and information.

One thing that I came to know for the very first time was that 50% of the people in emerging markets, including Bangladesh, would prefer to access the internet on their mobile phones. This wasn't the only thing that made me sit up and listen. In his speech the General Manager of Nokia Bangladesh, Mr. Chand, said that most new internet users would have their first internet experience on a mobile device, making the next billion internet users in the

world a very varied and interesting community.

When one thinks of the force of the mobile device, its sheer reach -- in Africa and South Asia and it is boosting GDP -- it makes one ask what would happen if everyone who had a mobile phone had access to the internet? How would it change Bangladesh? How would it change the region? In my opinion, this untapped force is the light at the end of a digital tunnel for our country.

The reasoning given by Mr. Chand was elementary -- affordability and infrastructure. Which is cheaper, the mobile phone or the computer, and which has the larger infrastructure (or network) -- the mobile phone or fiber optics and copper? Having asked this question and seemingly discovered the solution to all our digital woes one should ask, why aren't we already connected and what's holding us back?

Education is a major stumbling block. Even a semi-literate man can use a mobile phone, but the trick is to re-introduce him to the phone and show him what it can do. Local content plays a huge role in this, regarding which the government, companies like Nokia, and the development and software firms in the country can do some-

thing about. If there is something people want to access they learn so much faster. It is surprising that a 65 year-old person can learn how to send a text message.

Local content, language and subject matter are the key. Grameenphone's Cellbazar taps into something that everyone understands -- looking for a bargain. Similarly, going back to communication, Ovi mail is very useful. It is accessible from a mobile phone and one can send emails in Bangla. The truth, however, is that there isn't enough awareness about this. Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury said that the number of sites using Bangla and data on Bangladesh is insufficient, estimating that it was .001% of worldwide internet sites. That is not only a startlingly low figure but also a reality.

Not many local companies recognise the potential their business has online, and even fewer realise that their website can connect them to almost all of Bangladesh. Too many local companies think that their website is out there with the rest of world and not with Bangladesh. That thinking has to change. The more interesting local content there is, the more people there will be to use it or view it.

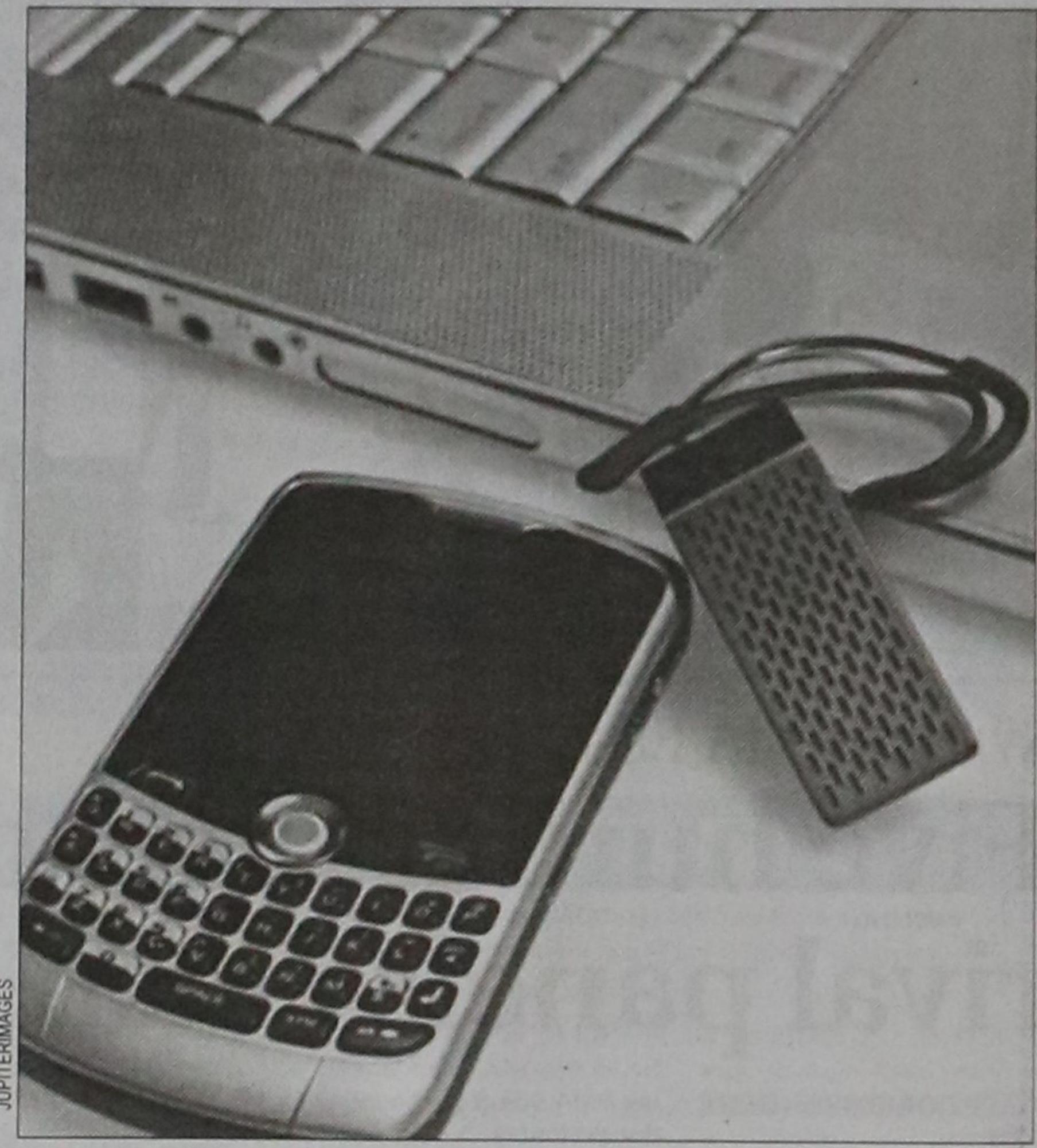
Habibullah Karim, president of Basis, said that this wasn't a dream, it was a reality on the ground now, and that's where the confidence should be built. Why would anyone log on to the internet if it has nothing for them? The

rules of the internet all revolve around personalised local content. We set our homepages based on our cities, our countries, the news we want to read, in short on what is familiar and relevant. If users can log onto pages where they understand something and know what's being discussed, they will be more inclined to participate.

It's what information society is built on, smart use of and access to content. It's smart to give low cost access to content through mobile devices, it's smart to educate consumers and, furthermore, it's smart to have local content. Because of this I agree with Mr. Chand and the Nokia attitude. Finger pointing doesn't work, asking who is responsible certainly doesn't.

Though it may be the vision of the government, Digital Bangladesh or information society, whatever you want to call it, should be a collaborative goal. The government alone can't be responsible for a digital revolution, though it plays an integral part in being the glue that holds us together through regulation and legislation. We are all responsible, which means that the talking needs to turn to action and companies need to help build confidence. That's why it is imperative that people from all walks of life involved in these elaborate discussions also take action.

"About 120 years ago electricity was available to about 30% of the world. And, in what seems like a simple turn, what electricity did to the world in the terms of coverage and lighting up the world map has happened in the last 20 years with the mobile phone." This



The world in your hand.

quote from Mr. Chand best illustrates where the light of our digital information society may come from -- mobile phones. Like the "alo ashbe ads" on TV, our enlightenment is already in

our hands; all we need to do is switch on the light and access it.

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Pakistan in serious danger

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Pakistan is at war with itself. The situation there is worrying and sad. It is worrying because the Taliban over the past several weeks have freely chosen to attack highly secure targets in Islamabad and other major cities, causing widespread damage. Clearly, the Taliban are now a force to reckon with. It is sad because Pakistanis are killing Pakistanis. Many innocent lives have been lost in these and previous attacks. Fear has gripped ordinary citizens.

On October 17, the army launched as offensive in lawless Waziristan to quell the Taliban insurgency. More lives on both sides will be lost. Hundreds of thousands will be displaced -- becoming refugees in their own land. Earlier in May, the army launched a similar offensive against the Taliban in Swat. Though the Taliban have withdrawn, life in Swat is far from normal today.

The region has been neglected by Islamabad for long. It has a feudal society based on tribal loyalty. Tribal affairs expert Rahimullah Yusufzai has described Waziristan as a "Black Hole." The Pakistan

army has little or no intelligence on this mountainous terrain of goat tracks, caves and thick forests. The battle here will be treacherous. The militants fighting a guerilla war will melt into the mountains and lie low for the time being.

How did Pakistan come to this pass? In its history of six decades Pakistan has repeatedly been manhandled and mauled by the army. Military governments, to justify their interventions, had kept the Kashmir issue alive, which they consider as their "front yard." They actively aided and abetted a strong secessionist insurgency in Indian occupied Kashmir. In their "backyard" -- Afghanistan -- they armed and funded the Mujahideens to evict the Soviets (1989), with US assistance. When the different factions of Mujahideen failed to govern and pushed the country to civil war, ISI decided to oust the Mujahideen.

Pakistan then created the Taliban and let it loose from across the Durand Line to evict the Mujahideen from Kabul (1996). The Taliban installed themselves in Kabul, enforced oppressive laws on the people and provided sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Like the Mujahideen, the Taliban also got out of



Where is all this leading to?

Pakistan's control. Soon after 9/11, the US launched military operation "Enduring Freedom" in October 2001 and ousted the Taliban-led government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban fled to the mountains from Kabul and remained active to "fight another day." They are now on the doorsteps of Islamabad (and Kabul).

The US has been helping Pakistan to contain the menace of the Taliban. Unfortunately, it is the Pakistan army that cooperates with the US military -- the elected civilian government has no con-

trol over these policies of Pakistan. Even now, the whole show is being run by army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. Recently, the Kayani-Zardari confrontation again came in focus.

The Kerry-Lugar Bill for providing \$7.5 billion to Pakistan over the next 5 years has further deteriorated the relations between the president and the army chief. The army and the civilian government were at loggerheads when Washington demanded that the civilian government maintains control over the armed forces. Kayani rejected the condi-

tion, saying it eroded Pakistan's sovereignty.

The US has a number of objectives for its involvement in the region. First, to keep a close watch over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal -- the "Islamic bomb" must not be used against Israel.

Washington has been spending millions of dollars to help Pakistan secure its nuclear warheads and laboratories from falling into "enemy hands" -- meaning the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

There are reports that US forces are actually involved in guarding the nuclear sites of Pakistan. Second, close

relations with Pakistan help its policy of encircling China. India is now an important ally in that policy. Third, the

US has eyes on the rich resources of the region -- particularly Afghanistan's untapped oil and gas reserves.

The resurgence of Taliban raises a number of questions. Who gains from the current turmoil in Pakistan and Afghanistan? Is it only the drug money of Afghanistan which is helping them to buy weapons? Are the Taliban really so

powerful that they can topple the civilian government in Islamabad? There are no clear answers.

It is unlikely that the Taliban will take

over Pakistan, unless aided by a powerful state. Pakistan's interior minister has

accused India of aiding the Taliban to weaken Pakistan. If that be the case, Delhi

may not find it amusing if Pakistan disintegrates and the extremist elements of

Afghanistan and Pakistan together install

themselves at its doorstep. The other

possibility is that Israel and CIA is trying

to make Pakistan dysfunctional and create a situation to take over control of its nuclear arsenal. China will certainly react to such an eventuality. Indeed, a Balkanised Pakistan will be to the advantage of neither Delhi nor Washington.

Pakistan still has a powerful and functioning military that has tasted state power in the past. The civilian government of Asif Ali Zardari should immediately patch up all differences with General Kayani. It should recognise that today Pakistan is surrounded by inimical states -- India, Afghanistan, Iran.

Pakistan's ISI must also give up its policy of destabilising neighbouring countries.

Washington should strengthen

Pakistan's civilian government and

discourage the army from taking over

once again. The US also needs to revise its tactics against the extremists. US drone attacks on targets in the tribal areas has been a major source of discontent amongst ordinary Pakistanis. For the extremists it is an ideological war based on religion.

Even if the Army succeeds in quelling

the Tehrik-I-Taliban for now -- extremism is such a malaise that it will linger on

and relapse at a later stage. Only a truly

democratic political process coupled with modern laws and economic development for the people of the frontier provinces will help resolve this tribal uprising.

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Bittersweet memories

So, Notre Dame, though you may have given me a hard time, you have also given me the best gift of all, some really good friends. People may come and go but I hope you stay there forever, giving young minds shelter with love, knowledge, principles, courage, motivation and above all friendship. I am proud and grateful to be a part of this college.

MOHAMMAD AHSANUZZAMAN

THE opportunity to be honest will allow me to state the following -- "I hated Notre Dame College." Believe it or not I hated my time there. I mean "come on" no opportunity to bunk classes, harsh lab brothers, rules strict as a military prison, lethal homework and, not to mention, the infamous weekly quizzes. I don't know about others but I cannot say that my time in the college was "rocking." I can imagine that a lot of people might disagree or get irritated, but I'm just being honest.

That was up until I faced the "Real World," when the harshness of practicality strikes you like thunder from up above. After being kicked in the behind by the hard and competitive world, I said to myself: "Hang on... It wasn't so bad after all." Every time I meet up with my friends from Notre Dame, those strict rules and

horrible days of discipline are the things that we share most amongst ourselves. Those were the catalysts that made our friendship so strong. They seem so sweet that words cannot explain them.

Seems like it was yesterday that I was working as a volunteer on the eve of Notre Dame College's Golden Jubilee celebration, serving snack boxes to the ex-Notredamians as a volunteer, and cheering and dancing with my friends. Ten years may seem like a short period to my senior Notredamians, but for me life has changed a lot. I miss those days. I miss those friends. So many of them are busy, so many abroad, we hardly have the time to see each other. I remember observing old friends meeting, hugging each other with tears in their eyes in that ceremony.

My friends and I were laughing at them and silently calling them "sissies." Funny as it may seem, I wish to do the same in the 60th anniversary.

I have had the privilege of studying abroad after I finished my HSC exams and went to two well-esteemed institutions. Esteemed as they may be, I never felt the love and warmth of the teachers and friends like I encountered in this college. World-class professors, bright students from all over the world seemed somewhat amazing. Yet, there was no one to guide me or punish me if I was wrong, so I had to learn the hard way. By making mistakes that is.

You can imagine how much I missed this college at that time. I made some good friends but none compared with the ones I grew up with in NDC. Living away from home I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. Good thing right? Wrong. All the freedom in the world, but none of my dearest friends were there. Given the option at that time, I would've gone back to being a student of Notre Dame where my activities were restricted and disciplined yet joyful.

I simply couldn't wait to get out of the college as soon as the bell rang, and hit the basketball court with my friends. Really, I still can't believe how much time I wasted on that court. Teachers and brothers shouting at us: "Scoundrels, get back to the physics lab" seemed unnecessary and rude. "Who do they think they are, policing us around?" we used to say. Not less than two years later I found myself studying in the library next to the university



College par excellence.

told me in London that friendship was the most precious relationship. A family is provided to us through birth but friendship is a relationship that we make ourselves. I met my best friends in this college (Rajib, Zico, Bunty, Jawad), who I believe will remain with me forever.

So, Notre Dame, though you may have given me a hard time, you have also given me the best gift of all, some really good

friends. People may come and go but I hope you stay there forever, giving young minds shelter with love, knowledge, principles, courage, motivation and above all friendship. I am proud and grateful to be a part of this college.

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