Being human in a digital world

PARVEZ MURSHED

We live in the age of digitisation, globalisation and standardisation. All these trends have profoundly impacted our lives in many ways. Digitisation has made life simpler, easier by connecting people. More importantly, this has created a level playing field through the internet among the netizens of the world. Five hundred million Facebook users in the world are every day connecting with friends whether old or new, relatives, and neighbours that they had lost touch.
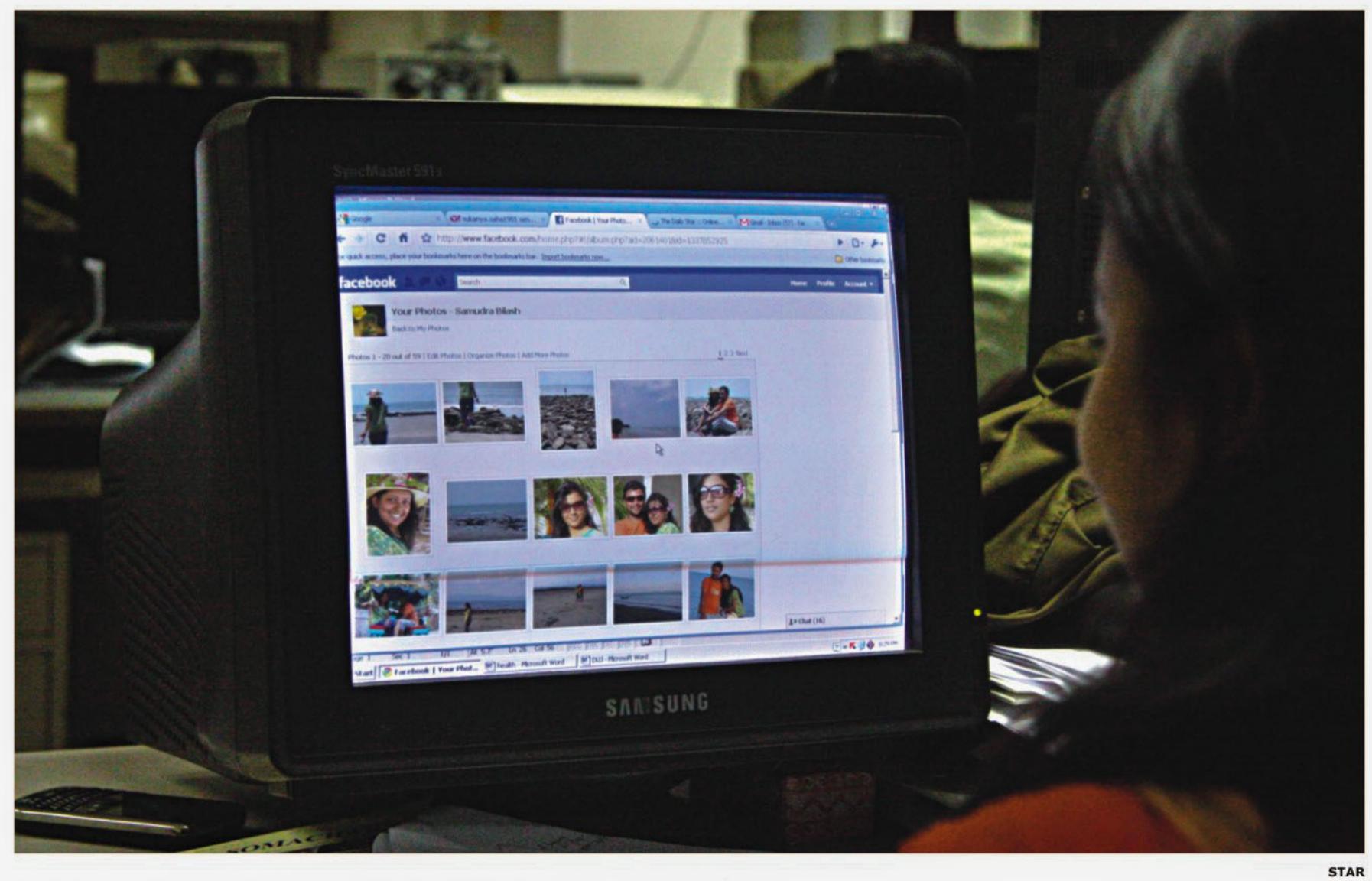
I remember as a child I would some time visit my father's office to pick him up, it was a treat for a little kid. Back in the 70s, there was no computer in offices in Bangladesh. Files would pile up in the desks. I now wonder how they worked without being connected through e-mail, internet/intranet, and blackberry. E-mail has given us speed but taken away personal interactions.

Digitisation has its price and the biggest losses are the personal touches and feelings among colleagues. I used to wonder why I always get the last seat in an airplane, mostly next to the toilet in long haul flights, till I learned how to book my seat through on-line checking. Now, I have been given the freedom to choose the seat that I want, thanks to internet.

I went to my high school reunion last week. As a Josephite, the trend used to be back in the 80s that you go to America after finishing HSC. I do not know what the trend is now. A lot of my friends do come home as 'winter birds' in December, it was nice meeting them in person, some after 24 years! However, I have discovered many old friends through Facebook in the last few years.

I hope a day will come when we can take internet to the next level in Bangladesh. With 3G, we can use the internet for broadcast, podcast and faster apps download and much greater contribution to the national economy if we can tap into the global outsourcing market, a $40 billion business for India, even 20 percent of that would pay huge dividend for Bangladesh economy and reduce our dependence on readymade garment exports.

Globalisation has opened vast markets to everyone and people now can afford global brands in local stores. When I walk into a McDonald's in New York or Singapore or even Kolkata; the service is the same. Yes, there is some localisation in menu but you get fast food in economical price, that's McDonald's. On the other end, if you visit a Mont Blanc or Louis Vuitton store, again the experience will be the same. Top brand products with high-end services.

While globalisation has created opportunities for people, it has also ensured that the good and the bad are shared across the globe, be it swine flu or financial contagion. I visited a slum, a project funded by Microsoft, in Manila in 2009. Kids in that community go to a centre to learn basic computer skills and internet usage. Think of the potential these kids have versus had they not been given this opportunity. Soon, they will be able to contribute to the global economy. As markets open up, goods move freely without restrictions and trade embargoes; we also have to allow people to move from lesser opportunities to the lands of dreams, a much difficult challenge politically. Till then, internet and technology are the passports and visas to global economy, and to export ones talent and skills and get paid while staying at home.

Standardisation is the process of offering same products and same services in a cost effective manner with no customisation. I sometime walk into a department store in Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong or even Kolkata and wonder where am I! They all look the same, the same ambience, look and feel, and the same products.

I first noticed this in 2002 when I checked into The Orchid in Mumbai. It's a nice eco-friendly hotel close to Chatrapati Shivaji Airport. I was impressed to see the waterfall in the lobby. Once I went into the room, it was a typical hotel room with a twin bed, a reading table, a television and probably a painting on the wall. I have been to many hotels since then, trust me I hardly find a difference. I feel like all the business hotels in the world have created a master plan. They all share the same room plan. Be it Conrad in Hong Kong, Hilton in Jeddah or Shangri-La in Dubai -- all are same. I was looking for a difference among the hotels but could hardly find any. Services were standardised, nothing outstanding. It was not like something that would make me say when I am in Hong Kong next time I must be in Conrad!

Very recently, I noticed a difference, I checked into Marriott Hotel one an August morning in 2010 in Hong Kong after a 'red eye' flight from Dhaka. Immigration in Hong Kong, all of a sudden, decided to question me in a room seeing my Bangladeshi passport though it was my sixth visit to Hong Kong and third in the year. By the time, I reached hotel, I was tired, irritated and exhausted. While I was checking in at the reception, one gentleman walked into me and said: "Hi, I'm …, general manager of Marriott. Welcome, and let me know if I could help you during your stay here with us." I thought 'Bingo', I finally found a difference, a personal touch in a hotel, and after all it is a service business. To be fair to all the hotels that I have stayed in I must say that more than the looks and breakfast I remember the small things. Like Park in Kolkata who left mint on my pillow. Of course, Peninsula in Bangkok has excellent service or Hilton in Jeddah has breath-taking views of the Red Sea. But end of the day its service out of the heart and people that matters.

In this age of digitisation, globalisation and standardisation, it's the personal touch that makes the difference. We want to feel like that we are being treated as human while fronting ahead in the digital era in warp speed. A simple 'thank you' from the heart or a genuine 'welcome' without artificial tone makes a difference in this busy world of bits and bytes, charts and numbers.

Parvez Murshed is a banker. Views expressed here are the author's own.

> *If Bangladesh can tap into the global outsourcing market, a $40 billion business for India, even 20 percent of that would pay huge dividend for the country's economy and reduce our dependence on readymade garment exports*

STAR

Facebook, a recently innovated tool, has opened opportunities for people to find long-lost friends.

Music industry works on global copyright database

REUTERS, *London*

The music industry is working to create a global repertoire database to make it easier and faster for new online music services to come to market.

The industry estimates that 100 million euros each year could be saved in copyright administration fees and returned to song writers and the industry by simplifying the current system.

In recent years, music labels and publishers have worked hard to license their music on an array of platforms including mobile networks, mobile handsets, websites, Internet service providers and pay-TV groups.

The long, complex process makes it difficult for many new services to get off the ground, as a new offering has to sign licensing agreements with the many groups that hold the recording rights and the music publishing rights.

Within publishing -- the part of the business that makes money every time a song is played on the radio, in adverts, films or online -- payments have to go to all the song writers on each track. One song can have many writers and they are often all signed to different publishers.

A service that operates in different countries would also need to agree terms with the royalty collection societies of each country it operates in, making for a very tangled affair.

However there is currently no database or central point showing which publisher or song writer unequivocally owns which rights, meaning it is hard to know where to start.

Now, consultancy Deloitte is working to develop a global repertoire database (GRD) for the publishing industry following input from Universal Music Publishing and EMI Publishing, some of the major royalty collection societies and retailers such as Amazon and iTunes.

The groups were asked by the European Commission to look into the issue.

"As an industry there have been many false dawns over the years but at last we seem to have woken up to the fact that we have to change," Neil Gaffney, Executive Vice President at EMI Music Publishing UK told Reuters.

"This GRD is a game changer because for the first time we will have an assured, common, trusted view of what we represent, own and manage.

"One of the complexities for a new services is people say they didn't know who to pay. It gets rid of one of the fundamental issues and means we can turn our attention to those people who use music illegally."

Deloitte partner Neil Allcock said they hoped elements of the database would be up and running very quickly, and aim to be fully functional within 18 months to 2 years. A similar project is also being looked at for the recorded music business.

> *The industry estimates that 100 million euros each year could be saved in copyright administration fees and returned to song writers and the industry by simplifying the current system*

REUTERS

Customers look at products inside Apple's flagship store in Beijing. The music industry is working to create a global repertoire database to make it easier and faster for new online music services to come to market.