

## Online harassment of children

### Parental guidance a must

A global study on online behaviour by children aged between 12 - 18 has been made public by the global mobile phone company Telenor recently. The survey found that nearly half (49 per cent) of children having access to the internet in Bangladesh have faced bullying, during interaction online, particularly on social media. It is natural for teenagers to portray themselves as hip and trendy, but often this leads them to behave in a manner that is neither proper nor gracious.

An unwitting child, uninitiated in online safety will inevitably fall prey to such behaviour. Six out of 10 Bangladeshi respondents stated that they can handle themselves when faced with a negative situation, which still leaves 40 percent who do not know how to cope with such a situation. As a service provider, Telenor, like any other telecom company, has plans to deploy an array of tools to make online experience as safe as possible. But one simply cannot overlook the fact that parents and school authorities have a major role to play here.

At the end of the day, it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to oversee that those underage children do not have access to certain sites which are inappropriate for that age group. And it is not only about blocking access, it is about having frank discussions about why certain areas should be avoided. Children need to understand the difference between safe and unsafe and only when that message is properly explained will online safety be truly effective.

## Plight of the Dalits

### Treat them equally, with dignity

THE fact that members of the Dalit community are being deprived of basic services such as education, proper sanitation facilities and drinking water, symbolises the deeply ingrained injustice persisting in our society still today. According to two research-based books launched recently, Dalit children face financial constraints at home and harsh discrimination at school, greatly restricting their access to education. The community also undergoes discrimination when using public water sources.

The facts revealed by the books are extremely disturbing but not new. Much has been written about the predicament of the so called low-caste community and it seems very little has been done to improve their condition. As Bangladesh's economy surges, the contrast between the shining face of development and the abject poverty that is the reality for many Dalits is all too obvious in the country. What kind of a society denies fundamental services like education and water to a section of its citizens who work silently but tirelessly as garbage pickers, toilet cleaners, street sweepers and shoe-shiners—jobs considered "dirty" and hence not deserving of respect?

Development is as much about economy as it is about promoting human dignity and freedom to choose. And a society is as strong as its weakest members. The development projects and programmes undertaken by the government must be inclusive of all.

It is also high time that we got rid of all ignoble discriminatory systems.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### PM wishes to get treatment in the country

Recently PM Sheikh Hasina has expressed her firm desire to get treatment in Bangladesh if she falls sick. This reflects her greatness and deep respect for the country's medical system.

Meanwhile, it is true that every year a lot of Bangladeshis travel to India, Thailand, Singapore and other countries for treatment by spending a large amount of foreign currency, which is really unfortunate. But there is no doubt that some critical medical conditions compel the Bangladeshi patients to go abroad for receiving better treatment. It is not that we do not have enough medical facilities and qualified doctors, but in many cases, patients cannot keep their trust in the doctors. The government needs to overhaul the whole medical sector and win back the trust of patients so that they take treatment in the country.

**Professor M Zahidul Haque**  
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University  
Dhaka

# Pressing the mute button



AMITAVA KAR

ONE of the most vulnerable institutions in the world today is the free press and one of the most expendable people are the journalists. It's a great paradox of the

technological that despite the promise of liberation and democratisation, the digital revolution, increasingly taking over traditional forms of media, has somehow produced a greater concentration of power in fewer hands, with less organised counter-pressure. The silencing of the press, otherwise known as censorship - whether by elected autocrats, armed extremists, dictators wearing mirrored sunglasses, or Ivy-league attorneys stopping leaks with electronic evidence - is actually easier and more prevalent today than it was two decades ago.

In his book *The New Censorship: Inside the Global Battle for Media Freedom* (2014), Joel Simon, the executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), writes, "Deluged with data, we are blind to the larger reality. Around the world new systems of control are taking hold. They are stifling the global conversation and impeding the development of policies and solutions based on an informed understanding of the local realities. Repression and violence against journalists is at record levels, and press freedom is in decline."

The book outlines four main reasons

behind it. The first is the rise of leaders in countries such as Russia, Turkey, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia who seem to be using their power to make it very hard for journalists to function by manipulating, denouncing, threatening and jailing them. Simon calls these leaders "democratators," as they exploit their democratic mandates to govern as dictators.



Our Silence by Mexican sculptor Rivelino.

The second source of censorship, according to Simon, is extremism. Armed groups now have their own ways of "telling their story" by uploading videos and posting content in the social media, thus making journalists "less essential" and more vulnerable.

Then there's the decline of the traditional media due to technological change. A lot of big media houses are closing foreign bureaus all over the

world, leaving the task of critical reporting to local correspondents. Most of them probably do a better job as they are more able than their Western peers to work up sources and get to the heart of the story. But without the backing of wealthy foreign news organisations or powerful governments, their position is far more precarious. For instance, in countries like Mexico, the Philippines,

never to jail journalists for doing their job, but uses the considerable power of the state machinery to plug any leaks it deems harmful to "national interests". And in Modi's India, books are frequently withdrawn after publication because of dubious legal cases brought on behalf of supposedly "aggrieved groups".

Democratic erosion thus takes many shapes - the hardest to see can be the ones right in front of our eyes. If an atmosphere can be created where laws are not well defined, journalists, intellectuals and artists stifle themselves in order not to run afoul of vague laws and even vaguer socio-political pressure.

Journalism or any kind of expression requires not only freedom but the assumption of freedom. If a journalist is constantly afraid of the consequences of his choice of subject or his interpretation of it, then his choices are likely to be determined less by truth and more by fear, the unwritten law. If we are not confident of our freedom, then we are probably not free.

In some ways, an even greater danger than imprisonment or violence is the internal mute button known as self-censorship. Once it's activated, governments or other entities don't have to worry about a thing. Once we learn how to keep ourselves from voicing our thoughts, we forget how to think them in the first place. And ideas perish at conception.

What could be more dangerous than that?

The writer is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# What's holding back the world economy?

JOSEPH STIGLITZ and HAMID RASHID

SEVEN years after the global financial crisis erupted in 2008, the world economy continued to stumble in 2015. According to the United Nations' report *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2016*, the average growth rate in developed economies has declined by more than 54 percent since the crisis. An estimated 44 million people are unemployed in developed countries, about 12 million more than in 2007, while inflation has reached its lowest level since the crisis.

More worryingly, advanced countries' growth rates have also become more volatile. This is surprising, because, as developed economies with fully open capital accounts, they should have benefited from the free flow of capital and international risk sharing - and thus experienced little macroeconomic volatility. Furthermore, social transfers, including unemployment benefits, should have allowed households to stabilize their consumption.

But the dominant policies during the post-crisis period - fiscal retrenchment and quantitative easing (QE) by major central banks - have offered little support to stimulate household consumption, investment, and growth. On the contrary, they have tended to make matters worse.

In the US, quantitative easing did not boost consumption and investment partly because most of the additional liquidity returned to central banks' coffers in the form of excess reserves. The Financial Services Regulatory Relief Act of 2006, which authorised the Federal Reserve to pay interest on required and excess reserves, thus undermined the key objective of QE.

Indeed, with the US financial sector on the brink of collapse, the Emergency

Economic Stabilisation Act of 2008 moved up the effective date for offering interest on reserves by three years, to October 1, 2008. As a result, excess reserves held at the Fed soared, from an average of \$200 billion during 2000-2008 to \$1.6 trillion during 2009-2015. Financial institutions chose to keep their money with the Fed instead of lending to the real economy, earning nearly \$30 billion - completely risk-free - during the last five years.

This amounts to a generous - and largely hidden - subsidy from the Fed to the financial sector. And, as a consequence of the Fed's interest-rate hike last month, the subsidy will increase by \$13 billion this year.

Perverse incentives are only one reason that many of the hoped-for benefits of low interest rates did not materialise. Given that QE managed to sustain near-zero interest rates for almost seven years, it should have encouraged governments in developed countries to borrow and invest in infrastructure, education, and social sectors. Increasing social transfers during the post-crisis period would have boosted aggregate demand and smoothed out consumption patterns.

Moreover, the UN report clearly shows that, throughout the developed world, private investment did not grow as one might have expected, given ultra-low interest rates. In 17 of the 20 largest developed economies, investment growth remained lower during the post-2008 period than in the years prior to the crisis; five experienced a decline in investment during 2010-2015.

Globally, debt securities issued by non-financial corporations - which are supposed to undertake fixed investments - increased significantly during the same period. Consistent with other evidence, this implies that many non-financial corporations borrowed, taking advan-

tage of the low interest rates. But, rather than investing, they used the borrowed money to buy back their own equities or purchase other financial assets. QE thus stimulated sharp increases in leverage, market capitalisation, and financial-sector profitability.

But, again, none of this was of much help to the real economy. Clearly, keeping interest rates at the near zero level does not necessarily lead to higher levels of credit or investment. When banks are given the freedom to choose, they choose riskless profit or even financial speculation over lending that would support the broader objective of economic growth.

By contrast, when the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund lends cheap money to developing countries, it imposes conditions on what they can do with it. To have the desired effect, QE should have been accompanied not only by official efforts to restore impaired lending channels (especially those directed at small- and medium-size enterprises), but also by specific lending targets for banks. Instead of effectively encouraging banks not to lend, the Fed should have been penalising banks for holding excess reserves.

While ultra-low interest rates yielded few benefits for developed countries, they imposed significant costs on developing and emerging-market economies. An unintended, but not unexpected, consequence of monetary easing has been sharp increases in cross-border capital flows. Total capital inflows to developing countries increased from about \$20 billion in 2008 to over \$600 billion in 2010.

At the time, many emerging markets had a hard time managing the sudden surge of capital flows. Very little of it went to fixed investment. In fact, investment growth in developing countries

slowed significantly during the post crisis period. This year, developing countries, taken together, are expected to record their first net capital outflow - totalling \$615 billion - since 2006.

Neither monetary policy nor the financial sector is doing what it's supposed to do. It appears that the flood of liquidity has disproportionately gone toward creating financial wealth and inflating asset bubbles, rather than strengthening the real economy. Despite sharp declines in equity prices worldwide, market capitalisation as a share of world GDP remains high. The risk of another financial crisis cannot be ignored.

There are other policies that hold out the promise of restoring sustainable and inclusive growth. These begin with rewriting the rules of the market economy to ensure greater equality, more long-term thinking, and reining in the financial market with effective regulation and appropriate incentive structures.

But large increases in public investment in infrastructure, education, and technology will also be needed. These will have to be financed, at least in part by the imposition of environmental taxes, including carbon taxes, and taxes on the monopoly and other rents that have become pervasive in the market economy - and contribute enormously to inequality and slow growth.

The views expressed here do not reflect the views of the United Nations or its member states.

The writers are a Nobel laureate in economics and University Professor at Columbia University and Chief Economist at the Roosevelt Institute, and Chief of Global Economic Monitoring at the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, respectively.

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## COMMENTS

# "THIS IS NO WAY TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY"

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON JULY 17, 2007, AND REPRINTED ON FEBRUARY 8, 2016.

**RABEYA RAHMAN**

What an argument! Was the imprisonment of the AL leader a result of the newspaper report? Reflection without study is dangerous. The Prime Minister does not need mollicoddling from 'seven Honourable Members'. I have read the report. I find nothing wrong in it. I have seen the interview of the editor. I did not like the harsh and aggressive questions presented to him.

**M ZAKIR HOSSAIN KHAN**

Shoot the messenger is the common strategy for any authoritarian regime. We are not surprised with the comments from AL policymakers about the editor of

DS. It can bear no fruits for the country if we continue to support steps which violate the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech. We need strong resistance against repressive measures to save and sustain democracy.

**SHAHIDUL ISLAM**

Mahfuz Anam should be praised for such a courageous statement. But I think the anchor of that particular TV Channel may have had a motive in raising this particular issue in the manner that she did.

**TIPU SULTAN**

Did they dare to try the then caretaker government

which was the outcome of their movement? They won't do that. Then why be so aggressive against an editor who published their news?

**SYFUL ISLAM**

The AL MPs should first answer what actions they have taken so far to punish those from the defense who grabbed state power declaring emergency on 1/11. As far as I can remember, the AL leaders at that time said they would give legality to all the steps taken during the tenure of the army-backed government. Some army officers were even promoted after the new government came to power. I urge the government to take action against the culprits who created the 1/11 like situation

and who grabbed the power illegally, instead of victimising journalists.

**FATEMA JASMINE**

We do not understand why the government is after such an honourable person. We appreciate Mr Anam for his honesty. Such is the way of the government to humiliate persons whom they are afraid of.

**SHAHRINA KAMAL**

Democracy? What democracy is present currently in Bangladesh?

**AHMED WARIS AL MAJID**

How is publishing a story about a person by quoting a source an act of "treason"?

**PAAL KHONDKER**

I think we should question the ethics of the journalists who, at different points in their lives have engaged in partisan journalism, and are now self-righteously ganging up on him. Where's the professional courtesy among journalists?

**ITRAT HUSAIN**

What is the definition of treason? Can someone kindly enlighten me? I'm ignorant.