

The irony of restricting access to internet in "Digital Bangladesh"

MOYUKH MAHTAB

ON April 3, news broke that the cabinet division had forwarded a letter to the telecom ministry asking that access to Facebook be blocked every night from 12:00 to 6:00 am. The reason cited was that use of the popular social media site – with 21,000,000 users from Bangladesh as of June, 2016 (internetworldstats.com) – was "affecting the students" and "dimming the working capabilities of the youths". The panic on the internet was magnified by some reports online with misleading headlines which made it sound like that the decision to block Facebook had already been made. By night, people had calmed down a bit: the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) had written to the ministry saying that the move was unrealistic. A day later, on April 4, the State Minister for Post and Telecommunications, Tarana Halim made assurances that there will be no bar on Facebook.

Over the course of this news' lifecycle, a span of less than 24 hours, concerns regarding the feasibility of the move, the impact on businesses, and even clickbait news headlines were raised. As important as all of those concerns are, a key issue was being ignored, especially by the authorities discussing the ban: does a government, especially one committed to bringing about a "Digital Bangladesh", have a right in the first place to block a site on the internet, that too, for something that is the concern of a private individual, or their guardians?

To start with the basics, what Facebook provides is a digital space, which can be argued to be a place where an individual can express his thoughts and opinions, where they can digitally associate and interact in a common forum. To extrapolate from our Constitution (Articles 37 to 39), all of these rights are fundamental to our citizens, and if the state wishes to conform to it, it must do so in the digital sphere too. It should not be the job of the government to play the parents and enforce behavioural or moral codes.

Freedom House, an organisation funded by, among others, Google, Facebook, Yahoo and Twitter, scores countries over the world in terms of freedom on the internet enjoyed by users, where 0 equals most-free, and 100, less-free. In its Freedom on the Net 2016 report Bangladesh received a score of 56/100 (partly free). In terms of individual criterions, it can be seen, that we scored 14/25 when it came to Obstacles of Access and 14/35 in terms of Limits on Content. Citing the various instances where Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Viber were blocked nationwide, and the draconian ICT Act itself, Freedom House reported: "Of the 65 countries

assessed, 34 have been on a negative trajectory since June 2015. The steepest declines were in Uganda, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ecuador, and Libya."

It is important to note here that much of Freedom House's assessment of Bangladesh was based on the frequent attacks on bloggers and the ICT Act's provisions for cracking down on freedom of speech. And although, it may be argued, that these cases differ from the one at hand, the issue I am trying to highlight is that given the nature of the internet, attempts of block and ban websites are fundamentally misguided and contrary to the spirit of the internet itself. If the government is sincere in its attempt to increase internet penetration of the population (which has indeed increased significantly over the last few years, especially due to the advent of 3G mobile internet), then trying to cordon off parts of the internet, even if they are for noble purposes, will ultimately end in failure. This is where we as a nation have failed to grasp the nature and potential of the internet, expressed beautifully by the creator of the web, Tim Berners Lee: "[I]t is the largest repository for information and knowledge the world has yet seen, and our most powerful communications tool. The web is now a public resource on which people, businesses, communities and governments depend. It is vital to democracy and now more critical to free

expression than any other medium."

Yet, our responses, when it comes to dealing with policy regarding the internet has been one of censorship. From blocking communication apps, websites on moral grounds, restricting access to social media, these policies make it abundantly clear, that when it comes to freedom of expression, we are uncomfortable. The prosecutions under the ICT Act have shown us how comments made on social media sites have led to disproportional punishments. It acts to restrict a medium whose primary allure is the freedom it provides. Our government even asked that Facebook require a national ID for opening new accounts – a ridiculous proposal that, unsurprisingly, Facebook did not agree to.

Ultimately, what suffers from policies such as this is freedom of expression and the press. Instead of working towards policy which aims to protect internet users and provide safety on the net, it seeks to set up new barriers to access.

Mustafa Jabbar, the president of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), in an interview over the phone, when asked about the preliminary recommendation of the government emphasised on exactly this. He said that he is in principle completely against the blocking or banning of websites for any amount of time, for any reason. On the feasibility side, he mentions that the blocking of Facebook would be

irrelevant: the students would simply move on to another site. No matter the intention behind the restrictions, from militancy to disruption of studies, the nature of the internet means anyone with basic proficiency can either bypass the restrictions or simply move on to other platforms. In other words, the only way making a ban effective would be to restrict access to the internet itself, something we as a democracy and as signatory of the The Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot in any way endorse.

It is heartening that the BTRC recommended along the same lines when it called the cabinet proposal unrealistic. They rightly pointed out how there are always alternatives which would then be used, and also that people who have friends and family living on the other side of the hemisphere, would face serious problems in communication. Our thriving digital commerce industry would surely be affected as well. Mustafa Jabbar further pointed out that a lot of business, such as ad placements and targeted marketing, is outsourced to people in this country by foreign firms. A ban such as this would seriously disrupt the work flow of such businesses.

But what is disappointing about the BTRC's response is that they too framed the debate around if such a move could be done, instead of if it should be done. The point of this article is not if businesses would be affected, but if a government should police how and what sites we access (of course there are always valid exceptions, such as in the cases of child porn and sale of weapons). Tim Berners Lee said in an interview with *Wired* magazine in 2014, "the web's full potential is just starting to show. A radically open, egalitarian and decentralised platform, it is changing the world, and we are still only scratching the surface of what it can do." The invention of the internet has meant a radical shift in how we learn, interact and express ourselves. In this world, Bangladesh has barely started dipping its toes. For whatever reason, be it national security or the good of the children and youth, this fundamental freedom of the internet cannot be destroyed. The questions the government should be asking is how the use of the internet can be made safer, the private data of the users be protected, and what infrastructural and policy reforms may be made to ensure that access to the internet can translate to its radical goals. Instead we seem to be busy in trying to dictate people's private lives online and controlling what they can or cannot access. One cannot run a race with their feet tied: Digital Bangladesh cannot be based on the culture of blocking and banning.

The writer is a member of Editorial Department, *The Daily Star*.



The questions the government should be asking is how the use of the internet can be made safer, the private data of the users be protected, and what infrastructural and policy reforms may be made to ensure that access to the internet can translate to its radical goals.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SPORTS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Widening the playing field



SARAH ANJUM BARI

THE internet is abundant with stories of how sports can, and is, changing the world. How it helps build physical fitness and traits of teamwork, respect, and resilience. How it has convinced disputing nations to reconcile over international tournaments (Armenia and Turkey in 2008) and historic table tennis matches (China and America in 1971) throughout history.

Cutting through these tales of divine athletic intervention, an article on *The Atlantic* titled "Can Sports Bring World Peace?" counters that, "When three men on their way to a soccer tournament are gunned down by separatists in a country... we learn a different lesson. If sports are really going to save the world, we need those kids who are now shooting baskets and goals in Israel and Ireland and South Africa to become not athletes but political leaders. And they'd better grow up fast." This sheds light on the important point that, in the current social climate of militant threats and gang violence in Bangladesh, sports must be used as an antidote to negative forces; not as a cure when it is too late. This is limited by the lack of facilities that can encourage involvement in sports

across a nation predominated by devout sports lovers.

Even a few years ago, Dhaka and most other cities in Bangladesh had a fair share of play grounds. Almost every residential area had its own park. Even in the ones that didn't, the abundance of free open spaces encouraged people, especially the young, to play outdoors on a daily basis. Cricket, football, and basketball weren't tethered within the confines of formal sports tournaments; they were a natural part of daily life. A lot of this has changed with the spread of concrete.

The World Health Organisation recommends at least nine square metres of open green space per urban dweller. But a 2015 survey on "Parks and Playgrounds in Dhaka" conducted by the Work For Better Bangladesh Trust cites that there are only between 0.052 to 0.5 square metres of green space square per capita. As the survey elaborates, much of this is a result of open spaces being taken up by public and private groups for commercial purposes. Most of them have been clogged up with construction of community centre buildings. Among them, Tikatuli Park, Uttara Sector One Park, Shahid Park, and Azimpur Park have been completely replaced, with a number of other parks losing chunks of their land to encroachment.

Interestingly, the survey also reveals that 68 percent of the respondents preferred to visit their neighbourhood parks. The 31 percent

that didn't, mentioned their reluctance over security issues and cleanliness of the parks. Disproving the idea that people these days are too busy to make use of playgrounds and open spaces, these figures highlight the actual issue – that what little interest in outdoor activities remains within us is choked by the threat of violence on the streets and the way that our playgrounds are polluted. For a nation that forgets class, boundary, and work responsibilities in wild celebration of cricket victories, these issues are disheartening.

The lack of playgrounds, and more importantly, a healthy environment in outdoor spaces, limits how many people are able to play outdoors. The proof lies in the web of badminton nets, and the impromptu cricket matches, played by kids on the streets at the risk of getting run over by speeding cars. Meanwhile, there is still a cultural disapproval of girls going out to fields to play sports. While some segments of the society may indeed be adopting more progressive attitudes, the staggering number of assaults on the streets is nonetheless a very real threat to girls' safety in public playgrounds. The unwarranted harassment faced by players of the AFC Women's U-16 Championship, on their way back from impressive victories over Iran and UAE, gives an idea of the social barriers girls face especially if they want to play a sport. Gang violence and incidents of kidnapping have made it increasingly unsafe for

children to play in the streets; so much so that the culture of sending children out to play every evening has all but died. And we can't blame all of it on technology and the popularity of video games.

In this absence of open public spaces, it is crucial that athletics be given higher priority in academic programmes so that students are able to play within safe environments. More importantly, however, the prospect of sports needs to be made more appealing to attract children who are shy of physical exertion. Yes, sports are beneficial, but they are above all fun. It should be that way not only for naturally-gifted players, but also the children with social anxiety, weight disorders, and more serious illnesses.

The United Nations announced April 6 as "The International Day of Sports for Development and Peace" in 2013 to highlight how sports instils virtues of tolerance and camaraderie among its players and supporters, and also makes possible a healthier lifestyle. In context of our country, particularly in light of recent events, we can expect sports to attract the youth away from the seductive forces of militancy and drug abuse. As a post on the National Institute of Drug Abuse website explains, "Although people tend to think of exercise as good for the body, it also benefits the brain. As it invigorates the heart and lungs, it stimulates the brain's reward pathway and heightens mood-boosting neurochemicals." The article further elabo-

rates that physical activity also builds teens' resistance to addiction, and may provide relief to mild depression. There is also the social factor – positive influence from coaches and team mates is likely to steer people away from harmful practices, if only for the betterment of the team.

Realising the strength of these benefits even among adults, and more corporations can be seen organising sports tournaments for their staff these days. It helps build team work and also provides more positive incentives for work. A happier, healthier workforce that translates into improved productivity.

The Prime Minister, while awarding the winners of local sports tournaments at the Bangabandhu National Stadium last month, announced that, "We want Bangladesh to progress further in games and sports where the boys and girls equally perform... we'll take measures to create more scopes in the field." The government's plan to open a playground for special needs children near the Manik Mia Avenue is a particularly laudable step towards the development of inclusive sports facilities in the country. In order for sports to truly alleviate our society, however, we need even more spaces where our young can play in safe environments, and also receive training to fulfil their athletic dreams.

The writer is a member of the Editorial Department, *The Daily Star*.

QUOTABLE Quote

Every man and woman, without exception, senses that there is something else beyond his ordinary life. The perfect evidence that there is something far better is his enduring search for it. If he persists, in spite of his doubts and failures, he will find the answer. It exists.

VERNON HOWARD
AMERICAN AUTHOR AND PHILOSOPHER

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Ocean motion
- 5 Mine section
- 10 Correct
- 12 Singer Cole
- 13 Billiards shot
- 14 Tea-growing region
- 15 Freud topic
- 16 Was inactive
- 18 Eat late
- 19 Store business
- 21 Singer Turner
- 22 Nickname
- 24 Humdinger
- 25 Deteriorates
- 29 Angular
- 30 Followed

DOWN

- 1 Circus star
- 2 Pictures
- 3 Explorer Hernando
- 4 Print units
- 5 Petty fight
- 6 Possesses
- 7 Down Under
- 8 Hardly hide
- 9 Buccaneers' base
- 11 Longs for
- 17 Fake handles
- 20 Monk's place
- 21 Ballet costumes
- 23 Metal hut
- 25 Leave base, perhaps
- 26 Marked down
- 27 New Orleans school
- 28 Didn't ignore
- 29 Designer Bill
- 31 Losing plans
- 33 Appends
- 36 Relieve
- 38 Dog's doc

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

MEN, I'M THINKING OF QUITTING THE ARMY

I HOPE YOU'LL REMEMBER ME...

HOW COULD WE FORGET YOU?!

GREG+ MORT WALKER 11-20

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

COPEL CSPAN
APART OHARA
REPRO ROPES
UNE CONTENT
SUR KID RAY
OPAL LOTUS
I AM GEM
BRYAN ABCS
POP EAT RAT
ALLOW ME EVE
SLAVE ELLIE
TINES MOLAR
EXERT SOARS

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

I HAVE A WEIRD HEADACHE.

OH?

YEAH, IT COMES AND GOES.

HI ZOE... HERE IT COMES AGAIN.

I CAN CURE THAT.