

CYBER SECURITY |

Your smartphone beeps you awake at 6am every weekday morning. On your way to work, you are scrolling down your Facebook newsfeed, liking or commenting on posts that resonate with your current mood. At work, you pull up your Gmail account and Google possible destinations for your next paid vacation. You Instagram your lunch and Snapchat how funny your friend looks at the party. Your cousins abroad WhatsApp you their latest shenanigans.

At any instant of our day, if not our entire lives, Google and Facebook know more about us, our preferences, our geotagged activities and our relationship statuses than anyone else. Edward Snowden calls this the Surveillance Age, where private corporations and public authorities are trying to understand us through our digital footprint at all hours of the day. All they require is a simple tap that activates our phone's Wifi or data plan. The access we provide to private corporations by willingly giving up our legal rights to our private information is often a concern when made available to governments – we then feel our privacy has been violated. Does this mean we trust private corporations more than our elected public representatives?

The government of Bangladesh recently stirred (more) public attention when Telecom State Minister, Tarana Halim announced it will request Facebook to share information about Bangladeshi users in hopes to “curb growing militancy” in the country (*The Daily Star*, March 17, 2017). In another news-article, AIG Moniruzzaman of Police Headquarters suggested Facebook requests Bangladeshis to open accounts using National Identification Numbers (NIDs) in order to effectively cross-validate their identities and reduce cybercrime (*The Daily Star*, March 13, 2017). In both cases, unsurprisingly, Facebook turned down the state's requests.

However, the government's efforts into monitoring communication date back to its Constitution. While Article 1 and Article 43 both protect the citizen's right to privacy, especially against unlawful search and seizure of communication devices or correspondence, the caveat arises with the clause “unless reasonable restrictions imposed by law permit it in interest of national security” in Article 43. The amended Bangladesh Telecommunications Act, 2010 allows agencies to “monitor the private communications of people and intercept communication with the permission of [M]inistry of Home Affairs, under a special provision for the security of state and public order”.

In reality, nevertheless, digital surveillance is more expensive and complex than warranted by policy briefs. Between 2013 and 2016, media reported over BDT 300cr government expenses on acquiring surveillance

technologies that allow phone calls and social media activities to be intercepted by government intelligence agencies, such as National Telecommunications Monitoring Center in Dhaka. Central to the purchasing orders were third party vendors like Israeli-American firm Verint Systems and Chinese firm Inovatio that are known for their

the State Minister's repeated requests to Facebook representatives would be nothing short of redundant. Can we then safely assume that not all our online activities can be tracked?

Irrespective of acquisition, deploying these technologies require in-house expertise that many intelligence agencies lack, as cited in

THE GOVERNMENT VS. YOUR FACEBOOK ACCOUNT

HOW MUCH CAN THE GOVERNMENT SEE?

SABHANAZ RASHID DIYA



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wiretapping technologies; the former was implicated with another Israeli firm in the United States' National Security Agency's wiretapping scandal in 2008. This highlights an important contradiction with the state's recent announcements: had our government been as successful in exhaustively accessing all our digital information,

the FBI-Apple encryption dispute in March 2016. The dispute also led to private corporations strengthening their encryption and privacy fronts, making it more challenging for government agencies to access user data. Later, in the same year, the ACLU in US reported the widespread use of Geofeedia and Digital Stakeout – tools

that can track and geolocate social media activities beyond the scope of keywords – allowing government agencies to identify specific individuals. As a result, infuriated technology giants namely Google and Facebook beefed up unwarranted access to their data. In recent times, the Trump administration and Department of Homeland Security have reportedly discussed manually searching social media accounts in U.S. borders to “detect terrorist threats” (*The New York Times*, February 14, 2017). This provides further evidence that existing surveillance technologies are well behind the rampant product growth and security enhancements within technology companies. In the constant tension between government agencies and private corporations to know as much as possible about people and customers, the real concern surrounding an individual's civil liberty takes a backseat. While policies are still catching up to emerging technologies, how can a layman protect his/her rights to a private life?

Much of the response lies in our own decisions to share our information. The government at current can only resort to third party vendors or social media monitoring software (SMMS) to intercept our digital correspondence. In recent years, the Bangladesh government has taken legal actions against individuals posting “offensive” remarks on Facebook. However, in reality, identifying their information did not require any advanced technology. A simple search of keywords and exploitation of our gullible tendencies to share anything on social media without permission or fact-checking are sufficient to implement the Penal Code, 1860 and ICT Act, 2006. It is not about what instruments of the technology were used to find digital data, but rather about the questionable policies that allow such doing to be used against an individual. How are the laws being used to silence intelligent discourse?

The threat, meanwhile, is more prevalent in our own willingness to hand over private information (and our rights to what can be done with it) to opaque algorithms owned by profit-minded, private individuals.

It is less sexy to hold them accountable, largely because we simply do not know exactly how our information is stored, processed and implemented. Perhaps it is how a government collects and aggressively responds to the same information that we find intrusive. That is alarming and beckons the urgency for discussions to shift in the direction of policies that will contain the Fourth Industrial Revolution, rather than the microwave evens that are still struggling (and miserably failing) to listen to us.

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PERSPECTIVE |

Here in Dhaka last year, at a conference on the future of print media business, DD Purkayastha, CEO of ABP Group, the parent company of Anandabazar Patrika, said of the paper's digital strategy: “We are giving what our readers want.”

The century-old newspaper is the “jewel in the crown” of ABP Group, a huge media empire with millions of readers and viewers. It played a crucial role during British rule and indulged in the power game afterward, but it was hardly ever praised for maintaining objectivity.

As the digital age loomed over print media, Anandabazar embraced an online strategy that sought to gratify the demands of its readers, as suggested by Purkayastha, at the cost of what is left of its journalistic integrity.

While expanding its territory on the web, the paper targeted Bangladeshi audience by focusing on soft and likable issues such as cricket and entertainment, as a reflection of its audience-gratifying strategy, along with its signature explosive commentaries on Bangladeshi politics.

Focusing on Anandabazar's explicit agenda-driven opinionised journalism will be a waste of time, but its apparent disdain for facts, accuracy and our history, and reckless handling of sensitive issues, is something that should be of concern.

Let's look at some of the most outrageous blunders Anandabazar has committed not long ago, aside from its hilarious misspelling of Bangladeshi names and places, and countless sensationalised headlines.

In a report on a meeting between PM Sheikh Hasina and the visiting Indian Air Force chief Arup Raha, the paper fictitiously stated that the duo had reminisced about an event of our liberation war in which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his daughter Hasina and other family members “were in a hideout” and witnessed a grand IAF attack against a Pakistani force.

Even a novice about our history would know that Bangabandhu had been arrested and taken to Pakistan before the war began. As Bangladeshi social media users reacted harshly to this ridiculousness, the paper has since erased the part with a vague retraction later added at the end.

But it does not always bother to even take the trouble of inserting a retraction when proven wrong; instead, the webpage is simply deleted.

The newspaper's inaccurate report claiming that Canadian authorities decided to expel Nur Chowdhury, one of the killers of Bangabandhu, from the country was removed after being challenged by other news outlets such as Deutsche Welle. The same thing happened when a fabricated story claimed that actress Joya Ahsan was subjected to a fatwa in Bangladesh that had termed her “Bangladesh's Sunny Leone” and had threatened her to leave the country.

At least two other Bangladeshi actresses, Pari Mani and Ashna Habib Bhabna, objected to the treatment they received from Anandabazar. While Pari Mani accused the paper of misleading



ANANDABAZAR'S ALT-JOURNALISM

NAZMUL AHASAN

readers by sensually distorting her quotes, Bhabna alleged that comments that she never uttered were attributed to her and that some conversations involving her that had never taken place were mentioned.

In an article professing chief justice Surendra Kumar Sinha to be the next president of Bangladesh, the paper stated that “East Pakistan's chief justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury was Bangladesh's first president”. Mr Chowdhury was actually the second president of Bangladesh, whereas Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the founding president, and the chief justice Surendra Kumar Sinha is still in his post.

While incorrectly stating that the post of the CJ ranked just below the president's and that Major General Abul Manzoor was a former president, the report went on to indicate that the PM had appointed Mr Sinha as the chief justice to appease the country's minorities. The fate of this story? Not found, 404!

In 2015, Bangladesh cricket team brought the guest Indian team to the brink of a “Bangla Wash” owing to debutant Mustafizur Rahman's extraordinary performance. Anandabazar reported, unsubstantially, that captain Mashrafe Mortaza had taken the Fizz to Indian skipper MS Dhoni to request him to give Mustafiz a chance to play in IPL, and that he had sought Dhoni's bat to give as a gift to Mustafiz. Mashrafe later trashed the report, but Anandabazar didn't retract the story.

Following the Gulshan attack in July last year, Anandabazar nearly slandered North South University by grossly headlining that the university was now a “breeding ground” for militants. About four months later, it carried another story by the same author that said Bangladesh government identified 18 educational institutions, including Dhaka University and BUET, in Dhaka as the “breeding ground of terrorism.” As for BUET, it claims, 72 percent of its teachers belong to either Jamaat-e-Islami or Hizb ut-

Tahrir. “Their job is to inspire students by using websites, video footage, jihadi books, audio CDs,” it states. Couldn't be more outrageous!

Most recently, one of its reports on an anti-militant operation by police in Sitakunda, Chittagong featured the photo of a deceased female banker as a militant killed in the operation. Anandabazar took days to adjust the mistake, albeit without any retraction.

Aforementioned articles could be debunked or challenged because they carried specific information, but some other reports contain statements that are seemingly unverifiable and hardly believable.

Interestingly, there's an absurd explanation from one of Anandabazar's own journalists. In an op-ed for the paper, Surbek Bishwas wrote why he and other fellow journalists failed to restrain from the temptation of seductive stories.

“Can we journalists firmly say that unless we can verify whether the police is feeding us deliberately or committing mistakes unknowingly, we wouldn't submit our stories?” he asks. “When other TV channels or newspapers break the story, we cannot help but regret it because we also had the story but decided not to run it.” So, did he just confirm our suspicion that his paper plainly carries stories without adequately verifying them? Maybe, yes.

Belated author Ahmed Sofa was one of the fiercest critics of Anandabazar, so was novelist Akhteruzzaman Elias. Elias in one of his critically acclaimed novels, Khoyabnama, which ironically won Ananda Purashkar by Anandabazar, branded the paper as “Bengalis' enemy”.

Sofa, on the other hand, in an interview with Kolkata's Swadhin Bangla magazine in 1999, accused Anandabazar of propelling the Partition of Bengal. Quoting Indian author Samar Sen's notable work Babu Britanto, he said, “When we were fighting for our language, Anandabazar intensified communal tension by writing that the severed head of a Hindu woman had been found inside a Hilsha fish.” It was, he said, intended to fuel riots. He also mentioned Anandabazar's “ugly” editorial that opposed Maulana Bhashani's momentous campaign against the Farakka water barrage built by India.

Their testimonies illustrate that in the past Anandabazar ran explicit anti-Bangladesh propaganda defying objectivity. Let us also remind ourselves of the infamous article by Nirad Chowdhury published in Desh Patrika, the literary concern of ABP Group, that termed our country as “so-called Bangladesh” and led to a financially painful ban on the paper in the country.

In this age when the free flow of information is celebrated, similar atrocities in the name of journalism may not be possible to be repeated, but Anandabazar's flagrant violation of the basic code of journalistic ethics deserves proper criticism. At a time when terms like ‘fake news’, ‘post-truth’ and ‘alt-facts’ are creating chaos in the global media industry, Anandabazar's alt-journalism shouldn't be left unchallenged.

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