

# Facebook's threats to the social fabric



NAZMUL AHASAN

**F**ORMER US President Barack Obama has recently joined a growing chorus of critics of social media. In a recent interview with Britain's Prince Harry on a radio show, he warned of the divisive and self-serving use of social media and the Internet, saying that people can have entirely different realities on the virtual platforms. "They can be cocooned in information that reinforces their current biases," he said.

He further explained: "The truth is, on the Internet, everything is simplified, but when you meet people face to face, it turns out it is complicated." Barack Obama is perhaps best positioned to say this because he watched closely, during his last days in office, how fake news and outright hoax were shaping the case for a Trump presidency.

In the days since, there has been a great hue and cry over Facebook's role in spreading fake news. Facebook has subsequently found itself under intense scrutiny by the US lawmakers over its power and influence. As part of the wider investigation into Russian intervention in the US elections, Congress has recently forced Facebook, along with two other tech giants, Twitter and Google, to hand over ads bought by Russians to influence the US voters. However, Chamath Palihapitiya, a former vice-president of user-growth at Facebook, believes that the problem with the popular social networking site goes beyond just Russian ads.

At a Stanford Business School event in November, he argued that this was rather a global problem. "It is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and between each other," he said. Less than a week before him, Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, had revealed that the founders of the website knew that they were exploiting "a vulnerability in human psychology." Both of them seemed to identify the "like" (or reaction, as it is called lately) button as a powerful tool to exploit that vulnerability. They described it as a "feedback loop" driven by dopamine and credited it for Facebook's exponential growth.

Both of them seemed to feel remorse for having helped create and make this Frankenstein grow

stronger. There also seemed to be a consensus between them about Facebook's effects on society. "The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works," Palihapitiya said. To Sean Parker, "It literally changes your relationship with society, with each other. It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains."

Sean Parker and Chamath Palihapitiya have had exclusive knowledge of how Facebook worked. That is precisely why we should take their testimonies very seriously, which stand in stark contrast to the visions of Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder and CEO of Facebook.

In February last year, Zuckerberg published his manifesto for humanity in a lengthy Facebook note, in which he outlined his plan to build "a global community" based on the website he had created. The prospect that Zuckerberg's global community will be run by a corporate entity that is hungry for profits, unregulated, and, for small countries like us, unanswerable, should terrify us all. The insight that Parker and Palihapitiya provided us has enabled us to analyse Zuckerberg's vision from a different perspective.

Facebook's global community, Zuckerberg says, will be supportive, safe, informed, civically engaged, and inclusive. But, according to Palihapitiya, Facebook has so far resulted in the absence of civil discourse and cooperation, mistruth, and misinformation.

Once responsible for boosting the number of users of Facebook, Palihapitiya reveals that the tools that he had created for that purpose are "ripping apart the social fabric." Therefore, when Zuckerberg says he wants to strengthen the social fabric, we should be wary of his motives and the motives of those behind him.

In his manifesto, Zuckerberg sought to replace traditional social groups, which collectively form the social fabric, with a virtual global community. For one, Zuckerberg cited declining membership in social groups to argue that these groups can be revitalised virtually on Facebook. He cited plenty of examples to show that the virtual community has the potential to deliver what social groups in real life once did but now cannot. In other words, he wants us to further reduce the time we spend in interacting with ourselves face to face. Zuckerberg forgets to mention that the declining membership in traditional social groups can be attributed to

the rise of social media, especially Facebook. Further strengthening the virtual society may, therefore, mean a further weakening of the traditional social fabric.

It is fair to say that Facebook facilitates the dissemination of information, helping people solve their problems by closing or reducing the information gap. Facebook's power to disseminate information, however, has been exploited to

people than unite, because admitting so would be inconsistent with the very business model of Facebook. It will be naïve to expect Facebook to revise its survival mechanisms or fundamental strategy that only seek to attract and make users spend more time on the platform.

That is why, we need to be wary of Facebook and other tech companies whose works profoundly affect the way society functions. We need to do



Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg walks past his army of Gear VR-wearers at Mobile World Congress.

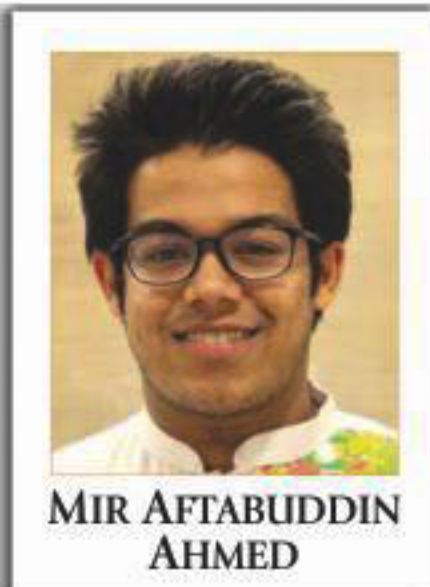
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spread misinformation. While Zuckerberg argues that his brainchild project seeks to bring people together, he admitted that it was also used to divide people. By saying so, he probably referred to misinformation, fake news and hoax that spread through Facebook. But he refuses to acknowledge that Facebook did more to divide

everything we can to allow traditional social systems and platforms to function vigorously, and make sure that the virtual community never takes precedence over the health of our social fabric.

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# Water pollution: Solutions that actually work



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

**A**S the incumbent Awami League government gears up for crucial parliamentary elections to test its popularity, it continues to face numerous questions about its administrative

successes and failures. Amongst its many achievements, curbing pollution is definitely not one. In reality, the problem seems to be getting worse. Since the independence of Bangladesh, no government has been able to effectively tackle issues related to pollution. And one of the reasons why there has been a growing call for decentralisation of major cities is the high level of water pollution in the cities.

While air pollution remains the topmost silent killer of citizens (it contributed to the death of 6.5 million people, mostly in newly industrialised countries such as Bangladesh, in 2015)—water pollution, especially in Dhaka, has presented itself as a very serious problem. A city of nearly 20 million inhabitants, Dhaka faces challenges on this front, ranging from inadequate sanitation, polluted rivers, and chemical outpouring from the surrounding industries, all resulting from the unplanned nature of urbanisation.

The development of brickfields around the city, the presence of tanneries that dump chemical waste into water bodies, river grabbing, and growing industries around the city, are contributing to the unplanned urbanisation. Yet, the macroeconomic objective of environmental protection is being ignored. Our rivers are dying, the fish rotting away—a classic example being



Wastewater from Savar Tannery Industrial Estate being dumped into the Dhaleshwari river through a pipe.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Buriganga river. Dhaka is one of the least liveable cities in the world, according to several international organisations, with water pollution being one of the major contributing reasons. The problems are there for us all to see. But we need solutions that actually work.

One of the things that the recently deceased Mayor of Dhaka, the iconic Annisul Huq, did was seek advice from noted architects and city planners as to what approaches to take to make Dhaka more liveable. Dhaka's residents warmly appreciated his efforts. Therefore, recognising the frailties of this city, and prioritising a "Green Dhaka, Clean Dhaka" campaign

across the political class, must take a front seat in the upcoming Mayoral elections. Furthermore, the central administration should pursue a policy of mobilising state resources to target ambitious annual reductions in water pollution levels, with the advice of city planners, while simultaneously conjoining this with a rapid de-urbanisation campaign.

The recent appointment of the renowned ICT entrepreneur Mustafa Jabbar to the Cabinet portfolio of Post, Telecommunication and Information Technology, showcases the kind of approach and recognition that are needed by those who wield power, to allow noted technocrats with

experience in their relevant fields to handle pertinent state issues, which they have studied and provided solutions to throughout their careers. The same approach should be taken when dealing with Dhaka's problems, particularly urbanisation and pollutions, by bringing in people with experience in this field.

In terms of legislation, as is the case with many cases in Bangladesh, there are enough laws but those are not monitored or implemented. The state needs to make greater efforts to monitor pollution levels, and punish the offenders financially, whether they be RMG producers or small tanneries. Taxing the offenders, subsidising eco-friendly initiatives, and enhancing accountability are some simple primary policies, yet important for Bangladesh in affecting a change. From a broader perspective, our country needs to enhance resources specifically targeted at improving the occupational and geographical mobility of labour. That is, the state needs to create a forum to make it viable and attractive for people to consider moving in between jobs carrying different skills, and within different geographical regions. The lucrativeness, whether stemming from financial incentives or access to resources, of moving a tannery from Narayanganj to an eco-friendly designated zone in Mymensingh, for example, will push businesses to reconsider their business models, and consider the move more effectively.

Only then will we see an organic reduction in water pollution levels in the rivers of Dhaka city. As such, reallocation of resources and areas of business remains a cornerstone in the fight to reduce pollution levels.

Another approach used by governments around the world, including Malaysia, has been the reallocation of state institutions to

new capital cities. While the idea of naming a new administrative capital for Bangladesh might be novice to most people, it is a thought that should be considered. In such a model, offices of all state administrative bodies, including ministries, secretariats, government agencies, etc. would have to be reallocated to a new designated capital city. Reallocation of the main airport and central offices of the Prime Minister and the President are all options that should be considered. While it may sound radical in nature, it may be necessary given that the problems arising from Dhaka's unplanned growth, if unchecked, are going to cause devastation in the long run. The citizens of this country are already suffering terribly as a result of that.

Colon cancer, asthma, kidney problems, maternal health issues, diarrhoea and many other health concerns are a direct result of city-wide water pollution. Air pollution has been statistically proven to actually kill human beings, especially new-born babies, through lung problems and asthma. Bangladesh is a proud country, and yes, we should surely be proud of what we have achieved. However, this cannot deter us from looking at what more we can achieve as a society. Something must be done immediately to decentralise Dhaka city. We have repeated this for some time now. All problems of congestion, pollution and poor living standards stem from the notion of an overly dense Dhaka. It is difficult to save Dhaka at this point, hence alternatives should and must be considered for the future of this country.

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American journalist, novelist and poet

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**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Do a checkout chore
- 5 Constellation makeup
- 10 Gift-wrapping need
- 11 Luminous rings
- 13 State frankly
- 14 Zoo resident
- 15 European nation
- 17 Reverent wonder
- 18 European nation
- 19 Maiden name label
- 20 Stop-dime
- 21 Slimming plan
- 22 Baby grand, for one
- 25 Prods
- 26 Burden
- 27 Use a spade
- 28 Stipulations
- 29 European nation
- 33 Drunkard
- 34 European nation
- 35 Book goofs
- 37 Collars
- 38 Showed

**DOWN**

- 1 Theater part
- 2 Grottos
- 3 Left, at sea
- 4 They result in dark nights
- 5 Singer Twain
- 6 Singer Tucker
- 7 Boxing great
- 8 European nation
- 9 Iodine source
- 12 Winter showers
- 16 -Domini
- 21 Con-founded
- 22 Balances evenly
- 23 Tells
- 24 European nation
- 25 Decorate expensively
- 27 Reply to "Gracias"
- 29 Kathy of "Misery"
- 30 Furious
- 31 Cited
- 32 Ship poles
- 36 Every-body

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

M	E	S	S	U	P		P	R	O	D
A	R	O	U	S	E		R	O	V	E
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				C	R	A	M		O	A
				J	U	K	E		J	O
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M	A	R	I	E		G	A	R	B	O
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R	A	N	K		E	L	A	P	S	E
K	I	D	S		L	A	S	S	E	S

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