

Being a Bangladeshi woman in tech

Pride despite the prejudice



TANZEEM CHOUDHURY

WHEN I was 12, my music teacher in Bangladesh groped my breasts when my parents were not home. It is easy to see how egregious this

behaviour was, and to clearly label such an individual as a "bad actor", as indeed he was. But this incident has had no long-term negative impact on my life, on my career, or on my relationships. In contrast, what has had lasting impact on me are the low-dose but continuous injections of doubts about my abilities, and the chipping away at my confidence that I have encountered as a girl and a woman over the years. They started early and haven't stopped.

I grew up in Bangladesh where the society constantly made me feel inadequate because of my gender. Now I am part of an intellectual ecosystem that questions whether women have the stomach to take big risks, to dream big, or to drive new ideas and excel while being a mother and a wife. I think this type of questioning gets more pronounced with career advancement, and is a reason why many choose to leave a



SOURCE: TWITTER

career in technology.

Let me highlight some of the comments I have gotten over the years that are indelible in my memory and that are representative of how my identity, ability and confidence have been constantly challenged.

An early childhood memory: a close family member tells me, "We were hoping you'd be a boy. Boys earn more and take care of their parents. Girls marry and look after their husband's family." I am the younger of two daughters. At age 43, this is still one of

my most vivid childhood memories, and the feeling of rejection is still raw.

Teenage years: a young man trying to date me tells me that "God gave women smaller brains than men, and that is why women would fare better listening to men." I wish I then had the courage to say, "You might have a bigger brain, but mine works better!" Instead, his comment started to sow the seeds of insecurity within me.

In my 20s: my then boyfriend dumps me when I get into MIT for grad school, and for maintaining a higher

GPA than him during our undergraduate years. I was devastated. That same summer, upon hearing I am doing my PhD at MIT, a family friend tells my mom, "You will have trouble finding a husband for her." Getting into MIT was a dream come true for me, but it was hard to share the joy with even those close to me—instead I went through more rejection, and dreaded the prospect of more loneliness.

In my 30s: a senior male colleague who I deeply respect says to me, "If you are serious about your work, then you can't have a life or kids before tenure." I start to fear that maybe I will lose my partner or never have kids. I feel torn for simultaneously wanting a successful career and a loving family.

In my 40s... a comment after one of my talks went something like this: "Very interesting work. Is it what you did when you were in X's (another white male professor) lab?" This time at least I had the courage to say, "No, I had my own lab. It was my inspiration that got the senior white male professor interested in the line of work that I had initiated." Finally, I was confident enough to directly dispute the assumption made all too often that men are the leaders and women are the followers.

From childhood to now, I have been fortunate to have had champions and mentors who have believed in me—my parents, my husband, and several key

senior male and female mentors. But from childhood to now, the doubting of my abilities, my intellect, and my creativity purely because of my gender has been draining and demoralising. When I am rewarded, I question whether the bar was set lower for me as a woman, or whether I truly deserve it. When I fail, I wonder where I would be today in my career as an academic or as an entrepreneur if I were a white male rather than a Bangladeshi-born woman. I will never know for sure. This feeling is tiring, emotionally draining and infuriating!

So, as we raise the next generation of Bangladeshi women in a patriarchal society, let's remember how casual comments or reinforcement of gendered norms, especially from those we trust and respect, can impact the small and big decisions that women make in their lives. I hope more men and women can engage in constructive dialogues to make things better. Subtle biases, casual comments and gendered expectations can squash our dreams, and force us to project an identity that helps us fit in but prevents us from feeling truly comfortable. Worst of all, it can have a lasting impact on our confidence and on our mental health.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Regulating speech in the new public square

MADELEINE DE COCK BUNING and MIGUEL POIARES MADURO

TODAY, debates about public issues play out on social media, people receive their news via digital platforms, and politicians pitch their policies using these same media. The Internet is our new public square.

In the public square of old, journalists and editors served as gatekeepers and acted as referees. Human news aggregators set the agenda and provided audiences with credible information and a diversity of views. We trusted them because of the professionalism and integrity of their editorial processes.

In the new public square, this model of journalism—and of journalism's role in sustaining democracy—has become obsolete. Traditional media no longer plays a dominant gatekeeping and agenda-setting role. Fake news can reach multiple jurisdictions at once.

But so can public and private measures that censor speech. The challenge is to redefine the parameters of civil discourse in the new public square without restricting pluralism. Recent examples highlight the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Despite the ominous headlines, the influence of fake news on political decision-making appears to be limited. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, the reach of such content is largely restricted to groups of believers seeking to reinforce their own views and prejudices. But that does not make digital deception any less dangerous. Fake news feeds—and is fed by—polarisation, and, paradoxically, the more it is discussed, the more disruptive it becomes.

That is because fake news undermines trust in all forms of media and reinforces the view that it is impossible to discern fact from fiction. When people do not know what they can believe, journalists' ability to police the powerful is weakened. This trend will only worsen as "deep-fake

news"—bogus images and videos that appear real—becomes more ubiquitous.

Clearly, the vulnerabilities of the digital public sphere must be addressed. Some argue that the solution is to block questionable websites or demote search results. Facebook, for example, censors duplicitous posts and has created an election "war room" to fight disinformation. Other global platforms, like Google and Twitter, have considered similar steps, and all three are being pressured to give authorities access to the private data of users who publish fake news or make defamatory statements. But we believe that these steps, while seemingly prudent, are deeply misguided.

At the heart of any strong democracy is a political consensus and arbitration that depends on the public's ability to debate and disagree. It is not up to private entities—or public institutions, for that matter—to censor this process. Rather, we should be working to ensure that citizens have access to a broad array of opinions and ideas and understand what they are reading, viewing, or hearing. Freedom of expression includes the right to receive and impart information without interference, which implies the corollary values of media freedom and media pluralism as enshrined in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights. Studies show that most people prefer reliable and pluralistic news sources; policymakers' job is to enable them to realise this preference.

A March 2018 report to the European Commission by the High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, which one of us (de Cock Buning) chaired, offered a roadmap, and the recent European Commission Action Plan provides a good starting point. But more needs to be done.

There is no silver bullet to combat disinformation. Only multi-stakeholder approaches that spread responsibility across the news ecosystem and take into account the fundamental rights involved, can provide adequate defences against

disinformation.

For example, professional media must do more to guarantee the veracity of their coverage. Fact-checking technology can help, as long as it is kept free of political and economic influence. Google, Facebook, and Twitter should stay out of the fact-checking business.

Big Tech is starting to take responsibility by committing to a

and integrate editing and fact-checking applications developed by reliable media organisations.

Platforms must also clearly identify news sources, especially paid political or commercial content. Many of these more immediate measures can and should be implemented in advance of the European Parliament election in May 2019.

We also need new international

Data shows that consumers in some markets still have difficulty distinguishing fake news from real.

Well-intentioned efforts to scrub the new public square of disinformation will certainly backfire; only consumers can marginalise fake news. We cannot allow private companies or governments to decide what people should know. The history of democracy is clear on this point: pluralism, not



SOURCE: ICCHANGE.CO.UK

Code of Practice based on the 10 key principles from the High-Level Report. But Big Tech can contribute in other ways, such as by providing client-based interfaces for curating legitimate news, ensuring diversity in social-media timelines, and making a high priority of reposting fact-checked information. Platforms can also improve transparency in how they use data and code algorithms. Ideally, these algorithms should give consumers more control over editorial preferences

collaboration and better jurisdictional rules to ensure that laws and regulations protect victims of fake and offensive news without restricting free speech or undermining the rights of whistleblowers. In particular, these conflicts should not be legally settled where only one of the parties has effective access to justice.

Finally, platform companies should cooperate with schools, civil-society groups, and news organisations to strengthen the public's media literacy.

private or public censorship, is the best guarantor of truth.

Madeleine de Cock Buning, Professor of Digital Politics, Economy, and Societies in the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute, was Chair of the European Commission's High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. Miguel Poiars Maduro, Director of the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute, was a member of the European Commission High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



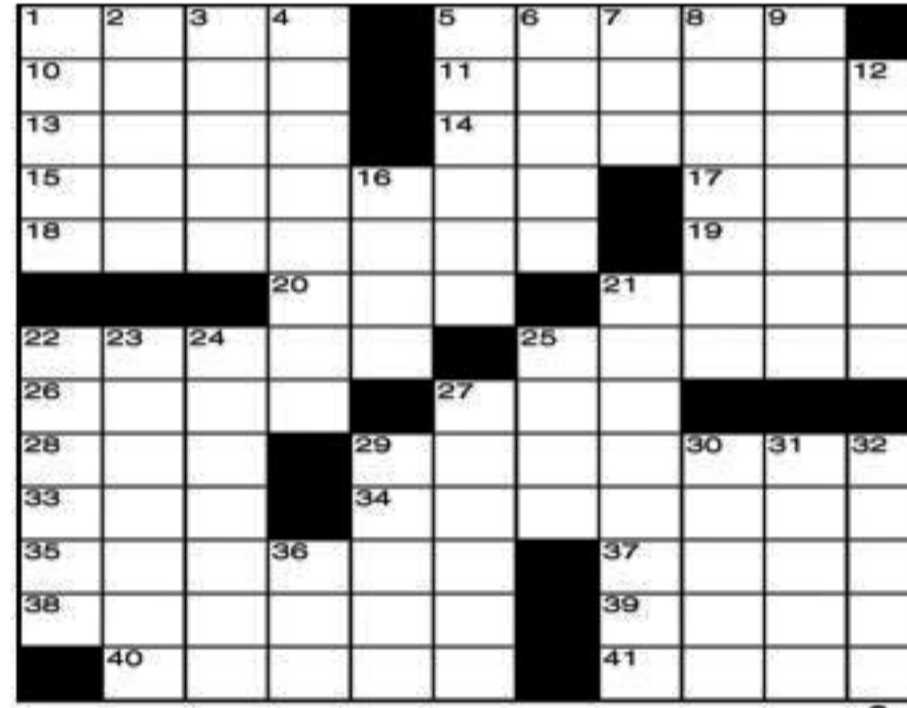
February 11, 1990
NELSON MANDELA WALKS OUT OF PRISON

Nelson Mandela, leader of the movement to end South African apartheid, is released from prison after 27 years.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 27 Soup sphere | 5 Slender sword |
| 1 Egotist's focus | 28 Wager | 6 Clickable pictures |
| 5 Takes the bus | 29 Kitchen tools | 7 Period |
| 10 Lotion additive | 33 Life story, for short | 8 Sudan neighbor |
| 11 Future oaks | 34 Free of additives | 9 Doing a con job on |
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| 15 Song part | 38 Generic | 21 Sculptor's output |
| 17 Binary base | 39 Mob revolt | 22 Thread holder |
| 18 Guarantees | 40 Archibald and | 23 Golfer's creak |
| 19 2016 Olympics | Thurmond | 24 Pennsylvania city |
| host | 41 Longings | 25 Theater unit |
| 20 Vacuum lack | DOWN | 27 Talks nonsense |
| 21 Transmitted | 1 Buffalo hockey | 29 Ageless dwarf |
| 22 Piece of lumber | player | 30 Bert's pal |
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

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